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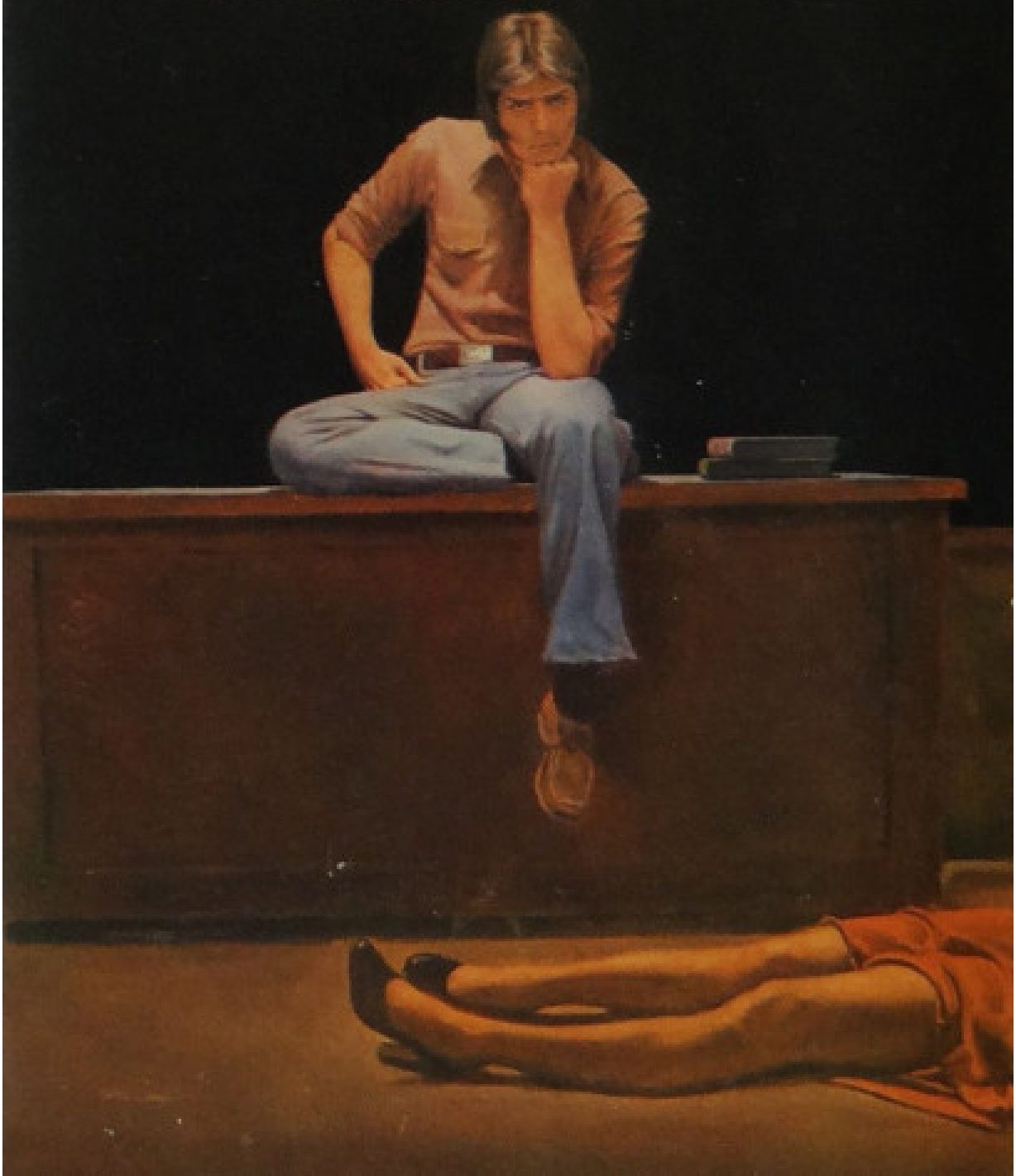
RAGE

A NOVEL BY
RICHARD BACHMAN

HIS TWISTED MIND TURNED
A QUIET CLASSROOM INTO A
DANGEROUS WORLD OF TERROR.



RAGE

Stephen King

as

Richard Bachman

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HIS TWISTED MIND TURNED A QUIET CLASSROOM INTO A DANGEROUS WORLD OF TERROR.

A high school Show-and-Tell session explodes into a nightmare of evil…

For Susan Artz
and WGT

So you understand that when we
increase the number of variables,
the axioms themselves never change.

—Mrs. Jean Underwood

Teacher, teacher, ring the bell,
My lessons all to you I'll tell,
And when my day at school is through,
I'll know more than aught I knew.

—Children's rhyme, c. 1880

Chapter 1

The morning I got it on was nice; a nice May morning. What made it nice was that I'd kept my breakfast down, and the squirrel I spotted in Algebra II.

I sat in the row farthest from the door, which is next to the windows, and I spotted the squirrel on the lawn. The lawn of Placerville High School is a very good one. It does not fuck around. It comes right up to the building and says howdy. No one, at least in my four years at PHS, has tried to push it away from the building with a bunch of flowerbeds or baby pine trees or any of that happy horseshit. It comes right up to the concrete foundation, and there it grows, like it or not. It is true that two years ago at a town meeting some bag proposed that the town build a pavilion in front of the school, complete with a memorial to honor the guys who went to Placerville High and then got bumped off in one war or another. My friend Joe McKennedy was there, and he said they gave her nothing but a hard way to go. I wish I had been there. The way Joe told it, it sounded like a real good time. Two years ago. To the best of my recollection, that was about the time I started to lose my mind.

Chapter 2

So there was the squirrel, running through the grass at 9:05 in the morning, not ten feet from where I was listening to Mrs. Underwood taking us back to the basics of algebra in the wake of a horrible exam that apparently no one had passed except me and Ted Jones. I was keeping an eye on him, I can tell you. The squirrel, not Ted.

On the board, Mrs. Underwood wrote this: a = 16. "Miss Cross," she said, turning back. "Tell us what that equation means, if you please."

"It means that a is sixteen," Sandra said. Meanwhile the squirrel ran back and forth in the grass, tail bushed out, black eyes shining bright as buckshot. A nice fat one. Mr. Squirrel had been keeping down more breakfasts than I lately, but this morning's was riding as light and easy as you please. I had no shakes, no acid stomach. I was riding cool.

"All right," Mrs. Underwood said. "Not bad. But it's not the end, is it? No. Would anyone care to elaborate on this fascinating equation?"

I raised my hand, but she called on Billy Sawyer. "Eight plus eight," he blurted.

"Explain."

"I mean it can be…" Billy fidgeted. He ran his fingers over the graffiti etched into the surface of his desk; SM L DK, HOT SHIT, TOMMY '73. "See, if you add eight and eight, it means…"

"Shall I lend you my thesaurus?" Mrs. Underwood asked, smiling alertly. My stomach began to hurt a little, my breakfast started to move around a little, so I looked back at the squirrel for a while. Mrs. Underwood's smile reminded me of the shark in *Jaws.*

Carol Granger raised her hand. Mrs. Underwood nodded. “Doesn’t he mean that eight plus eight also fulfills the equation’s need for truth?”

“I don’t know *what* he means,” Mrs. Underwood said.

A general laugh. “Can you fulfill the equation’s truth in any other ways, Miss Granger?”

Carol began, and that was when the intercom said: “Charles Decker to the office, please. Charles Decker. Thank you.”

I looked at Mrs. Underwood, and she nodded. My stomach had begun to feel shriveled and old. I got up and left the room. When I left, the squirrel was still scampering.

I was halfway down the hall when I thought I heard Mrs. Underwood coming after me, her hands raised into twisted claws, smiling her big shark smile. *We don’t need boys of your type around here…boys of your type belong in Greenmantle…or the reformatory…or the state hospital for the criminally insane…so get out! Get out! Get out!*

I turned around, groping in my back pocket for the pipe wrench that was no longer there, and now my breakfast was a hard hot ball inside my guts. But I wasn’t afraid, not even when she wasn’t there. I’ve read too many books.

Chapter 3

I stopped in the bathroom to take a whiz and eat some Ritz crackers. I always carry some Ritz crackers in a Baggie. When your stomach's bad, a few crackers can do wonders. One hundred thousand pregnant women can't be wrong. I was thinking about Sandra Cross, whose response in class a few minutes ago had been not bad, but also not the end. I was thinking about how she lost her buttons. She was always losing them—off blouses, off skirts, and the one time I had taken her to a school dance, she had lost the button off the top of her Wranglers and they had almost fallen down. Before she figured out what was happening, the zipper on the front of her jeans had come halfway unzipped, showing a V of flat white panties that was blackly exciting. Those panties were tight, white, and spotless. They were immaculate. They lay against her lower belly with sweet snugness and made little ripples while she moved her body to the beat…until she realized what was going on and dashed for the girls' room. Leaving me with a memory of the Perfect Pair of Panties. Sandra was a Nice Girl, and if I had never known it before, I sure-God knew it then, because we all know that the Nice Girls wear the white panties. None of that New York shit is going down in Placerville, Maine.

But Mr. Denver kept creeping in, pushing away Sandra and her pristine panties. You can't stop your mind; the damn thing just keeps right on going. All the same, I felt a great deal of sympathy for Sandy, even though she was never going to figure out just what the quadratic equation was all about. If Mr. Denver and Mr. Grace decided to send me to Greenmantle, I might never see Sandy again. And that would be too bad.

I got up from the hopper, dusted the cracker crumbs down into the bowl, and flushed it. High-school toilets are all the same; they sound like 747s taking off. I've always hated pushing that handle. It makes you sure that the sound is clearly audible in the adjacent classroom and that everybody is thinking: Well, there goes another load. I've always thought a man should be alone with what my mother insisted I call lemonade and chocolate when I was a little kid. The bathroom should be a confessional sort of place. But they foil you. They always foil you. You can't even blow your nose and keep it a secret. Someone's always got to know, someone's always got to peek. People like Mr. Denver and Mr. Grace even get paid for it.

But by then the bathroom door was wheezing shut behind me and I was in the hall again. I paused, looking around. The only sound was the sleepy hive drone that means it's Wednesday again, Wednesday morning, ten past nine, everyone caught for another day in the splendid sticky web of Mother Education.

I went back into the bathroom and took out my Flair. I was going to write something witty on the wall like SANDRA CROSS WEARS WHITE UNDERPANTS, and then I caught sight of my face in the mirror. There were bruised half-moons under my eyes, which looked wide and white and stary. The nostrils were half-flared and ugly. The mouth was a white, twisted line.

I wrote EAT SHIT on the wall until the pen suddenly snapped in my straining fingers. It dropped on the floor and I kicked it.

There was a sound behind me. I didn't turn around. I closed my eyes and breathed slowly and deeply until I had myself under control. Then I went upstairs.

Chapter 4

The administration offices of Placerville High are on the third floor, along with the study hall, the library, and Room 300, which is the typing room. When you push through the door from the stairs, the first thing you hear is that steady clickety-clack. The only time it lets up is when the bell changes the classes or when Mrs. Green has something to say. I guess she usually doesn't say much, because the typewriters hardly ever stop. There are thirty of them in there, a battle-scarred platoon of gray Underwoods. They have them marked with numbers so you know which one is yours. The sound never stops, clickety-clack, clickety-clack, from September to June. I'll always associate that sound with waiting in the outer office of the admin offices for Mr. Denver or Mr. Grace, the original dipso-duo. It got to be a lot like those jungle movies where the hero and his safari are pushing deep into darkest Africa, and the hero says: "Why don't they stop those blasted drums?" And when the blasted drums stop he regards the shadowy, rustling foliage and says: "I don't like it. It's too quiet."

I had gotten to the office late just so Mr. Denver would be ready to see me, but the receptionist, Miss Marble, only smiled and said, "Sit down, Charlie. Mr. Denver will be right with you."

So I sat down outside the slatted railing, folded my hands, and waited for Mr. Denver to be right with me. And who should be in the other chair but one of my father's good friends, Al Lathrop. He was giving me the old slick-eye, too, I can tell you. He had a briefcase on his lap and a bunch of sample textbooks beside him. I had never seen him in a suit before. He and my father were a couple of mighty hunters. Slayers of the fearsome sharp-

toothed deer and the killer partridge. I had been on a hunting trip once with my father and Al and a couple of my father's other friends. Part of Dad's never-ending campaign to Make a Man Out of My Son.

"Hi, there!" I said, and gave him a big shit-eating grin. And I could tell from the way he jumped that he knew all about me.

"Uh, hi, uh, Charlie." He glanced quickly at Miss Marble, but she was going over attendance lists with Mrs. Venson from next door. No help there. He was all alone with Carl Decker's psychotic son, the fellow who had nearly killed the chemistry-physics teacher.

"Sales trip, huh?" I asked him.

"Yeah, that's right." He grinned as best he could. "Just out there selling the old books."

"Really crushing the competition, huh?"

He jumped again. "Well, you win some, you lose some, you know, Charlie."

Yeah, I knew that. All at once I didn't want to put the needle in him anymore. He was forty and getting bald and there were crocodile purses under his eyes. He went from school to school in a Buick station wagon loaded with textbooks and he went hunting for a week in November every year with my father and my father's friends, up in the Allagash. And one year I had gone with them. I had been nine, and I woke up and they had been drunk and they had scared me. That was all. But this man was no ogre. He was just forty-baldish and trying to make a buck. And if I had heard him saying he would murder his wife, that was just talk. After all, I was the one with blood on my hands.

But I didn't like the way his eyes were darting around, and for a moment —just a moment—I could have grabbed his windpipe between my hands and yanked his face up to mine and screamed into it: *You and my father and all your friends, you should all have to go in there with me, you should all have to go to Greenmantle with me, because you're all in it, you're all in it, you're all a part of this!*

Instead I sat and watched him sweat and thought about old times.

Chapter 5

I came awake with a jerk out of a nightmare I hadn't had for a long time; a dream where I was in some dark blind alley and something was coming for me, some dark hunched monster that creaked and dragged itself along…a monster that would drive me insane if I saw it. Bad dream. I hadn't had it since I was a little kid, and I was a big kid now. Nine years old.

At first I didn't know where I was, except it sure wasn't my bedroom at home. It seemed too close, and it smelled different. I was cold and cramped, and I had to take a whiz something awful.

There was a harsh burst of laughter that made me jerk in my bed—except it wasn't a bed, it was a bag.

"So she's some kind of fucking bag," Al Lathrop said from beyond the canvas wall, "but *fucking's* the operant word there."

Camping, I was camping with my dad and his friends. I hadn't wanted to come.

"Yeah, but how do you git it up, Al? That's what I want to know." That was Scotty Norwiss, another one of Dad's friends. His voice was slurred and furry, and I started to feel afraid again. They were drunk.

"I just turn off the lights and pretend I'm with Carl Decker's wife," Al said, and there was another bellow of laughter that made me cringe and jerk in my sleeping bag. Oh, God, I needed to whiz piss make lemonade whatever you wanted to call it. But I didn't want to go out there while they were drinking and talking.

I turned to the tent wall and discovered I could see them. They were between the tent and the campfire, and their shadows, tall and alien-

looking, were cast on the canvas. It was like watching a magic lantern show. I watched the shadow-bottle go from one shadow-hand to the next.

"You know what I'd do if I caught you with my wife?" My dad asked Al.

"Probably ask if I needed any help," Al said, and there was another burst of laughter. The elongated shadow-heads on the tent wall bobbed up and down, back and forth, with insectile glee. They didn't look like people at all. They looked like a bunch of talking praying mantises, and I was afraid.

"No, seriously," my dad said. "Seriously. You know what I'd do if I caught somebody with my wife?"

"What, Carl?" That was Randy Earl.

"You see this?"

A new shadow on the canvas. My father's hunting knife, the one he carried out in the woods, the one I later saw him gut a deer with, slamming it into the deer's guts to the hilt and then ripping upward, the muscles in his forearm bulging, spilling out green and steaming intestines onto a carpet of needles and moss. The firelight and the angle of the canvas turned the hunting knife into a spear.

"You see this son of a bitch? I catch some guy with my wife, I'd whip him over on his back and cut off his accessories."

"He'd pee sitting down to the end of his days, right, Carl?" That was Hubie Levesque, the guide. I pulled my knees up to my chest and hugged them. I've never had to go to the bathroom so bad in my life, before or since.

"You're goddamn right," Carl Decker, my sterling Dad, said.

"Wha' about the woman in the case, Carl?" Al Lathrop asked. He was very drunk. I could even tell which shadow was his. He was rocking back and forth as if he was sitting in a rowboat instead of on a log by the campfire. "Thass what I wanna know. What do you do about a woman who less—lets—someone in the back door? Huh?"

The hunting knife that had turned into a spear moved slowly back and forth. My father said, "The Cherokees used to slit their noses. The idea was to put a cunt right up on their faces so everyone in the tribe could see what part of them got them in trouble."

My hands left my knees and slipped down to my crotch. I cupped my testicles and looked at the shadow of my father's hunting knife moving

slowly back and forth. There were terrible cramps in my belly. I was going to whiz in my sleeping bag if I didn't hurry up and go.

"Slit their noses, huh?" Randy said. "That's pretty goddamn good. If they still did that, half the women in Placerville would have a snatch at both ends."

"Not my wife," my father said very quietly, and now the slur in his voice was gone, and the laughter at Randy's joke stopped in mid-roar.

"No, 'course not, Carl," Randy said uncomfortably. "Hey, shit. Have a drink."

My father's shadow tipped the bottle back.

"I wun't slit her nose," Al Lathrop said. "I'd blow her goddamn cheatin' head off."

"There you go," Hubie said. "I'll drink to it."

I couldn't hold it anymore. I squirmed out of the sleeping bag and felt the cold October air bite into my body, which was naked except for a pair of shorts. It seemed like my cock wanted to shrivel right back into my body. And the one thing that kept going around and around in my mind—I was still partly asleep, I guess, and the whole conversation had seemed like a dream, maybe a continuation of the creaking monster in the alley—was that when I was smaller, I used to get into my mom's bed after Dad had put on his uniform and gone off to work in Portland, I used to sleep beside her for an hour before breakfast.

Dark, fear, firelight, shadows like praying mantises. I didn't want to be out in these woods seventy miles from the nearest town with these drunk men. I wanted my mother.

I came out through the tent flap, and my father turned toward me. The hunting knife was still in his hand. He looked at me, and I looked at him. I've never forgotten that my dad with a reddish beard stubble on his face and a hunting cap cocked on his head and that hunting knife in his hand. All the conversation stopped. Maybe they were wondering how much I had heard. Maybe they were even ashamed.

"What the hell do you want?" my dad asked, sheathing the knife.

"Give him a drink, Carl," Randy said, and there was a roar of laughter. Al laughed so hard he fell over. He was pretty drunk.

"I gotta whiz," I said.

"Then go do it, for Christ's sake," my dad said.

I went over in the grove and tried to whiz. For a long time it wouldn't come out. It was like a hot soft ball of lead in my lower belly. I had nothing but a fingernail's length of penis—the cold had really shriveled it. At last it did come, in a great steaming flood, and when it was all out of me, I went back into the tent and got in my sleeping bag. None of them looked at me. They were talking about the war. They had all been in the war.

My dad got his deer three days later, on the last day of the trip. I was with him. He got it perfectly, in the bunch of muscle between neck and shoulder, and the buck went down in a heap, all grace gone.

We went over to it. My father was smiling, happy. He had unsheathed his knife. I knew what was going to happen, and I knew I was going to be sick, and I couldn't help any of it. He planted a foot on either side of the buck and pulled one of its legs back and shoved the knife in. One quick upward rip, and its guts spilled out on the forest floor, and I turned around and heaved up my breakfast.

When I turned back to him, he was looking at me. He never said anything, but I could read the contempt and disappointment in his eyes. I had seen it there often enough. I didn't say anything either. But if I had been able to, I would have said: *It isn't what you think.*

That was the first and last time I ever went hunting with my dad.

Chapter 6

Al Lathrop was still thumbing through his textbook samples and pretending he was too busy to talk to me when the intercom on Miss Marble's desk buzzed, and she smiled at me as if we had a great and sexy secret. "You can go in now, Charlie."

I got up. "Sell those textbooks, Al."

He gave me a quick, nervous, insincere smile. "I sure will, uh, Charlie."

I went through the slatted gate, past the big safe set into the wall on the right and Miss Marble's cluttered desk on the left. Straight ahead was a door with a frosted glass pane. THOMAS DENVER PRINCIPAL was lettered on the glass. I walked in.

Mr. Denver was looking at *The Bugle,* the school rag. He was a tall, cadaverous man who looked something like John Carradine. He was bald and skinny. His hands were long and full of knuckles. His tie was pulled down, and the top button of his shirt was undone. The skin on his throat looked grizzled and irritated from overshaving.

"Sit down, Charlie."

I sat down and folded my hands. I'm a great old hand-folder. It's a trick I picked up from my father. Through the window behind Mr. Denver I could see the lawn, but not the fearless way it grew right up to the building. I was too high, and it was too bad. It might have helped, like a night-light when you are small.

Mr. Denver put *The Bugle* down and leaned back in his chair. "Kind of hard to see that way, isn't it?" He grunted. Mr. Denver was a crackerjack

grunter. If there was a National Grunting Bee, I would put all my money on Mr. Denver. I brushed my hair away from my eyes.

There was a picture of Mr. Denver's family on his desk, which was even more cluttered than Miss Marble's. The family looked well-fed and well-adjusted. His wife was sort of porky, but the two kids were as cute as buttons and didn't look a bit like John Carradine. Two little girls, both blond.

"Don Grace has finished his report, and I've had it since last Thursday, considering his conclusions and his recommendations as carefully as I can. We all appreciate the seriousness of this matter, and I've taken the liberty of discussing the whole thing with John Carlson, also."

"How is he?" I asked.

"Pretty well. He'll be back in a month, I should think."

"Well, that's something."

"It is?" He blinked at me very quickly, the way lizards do.

"I didn't kill him. That's something."

"Yes." Mr. Denver looked at me steadily. "Do you wish you had?"

"No."

He leaned forward, drew his chair up to his desk, looked at me, shook his head, and began, "I'm very puzzled when I have to speak the way I'm about to speak to you, Charlie. Puzzled and sad. I've been in the kid business since 1947, and I still can't understand these things. I feel what I have to say to you is right and necessary, but it also makes me unhappy. Because I still can't understand why a thing like this happens. In 1959 we had a very bright boy here who beat a junior-high-school girl quite badly with a baseball bat. Eventually we had to send him to South Portland Correctional Institute. All he could say was that she wouldn't go out with him. Then he would smile." Mr. Denver shook his head.

"Don't bother."

"What?"

"Don't bother trying to understand. Don't lose any sleep over it."

"But why, Charlie? Why did you do that? My God, he was on an operating table for nearly four hours—"

"Why is Mr. Grace's question," I said. "He's the school shrink. You, you only ask it because it makes a nice lead-in to your sermon. I don't want to listen to any more sermons. They don't mean *shit* to me. It's *over.* He was

going to live or die. He lived. I'm glad. You do what you have to do. What you and Mr. Grace decided to do. But don't you try to understand me."

"Charlie, understanding is part of my job."

"But helping you do your job isn't part of mine," I said. "So let me tell you one thing. To sort of help open the lines of communication, okay?"

"Okay…"

I held my hands tightly in my lap. They were trembling. "I'm sick of you and Mr. Grace and all the rest of you. You used to make me afraid and you still make me afraid but now you make me tired too, and I've decided I don't have to put up with that. The way I am, I can't put up with that. What you think doesn't mean anything to me. You're not qualified to deal with me. So just stand back. I'm warning you. You're not qualified."

My voice had risen to a trembling near-shout.

Mr. Denver sighed.

"So you may think, Charlie. But the laws of the state say otherwise. After having read Mr. Grace's report, I think I agree with him that you don't understand yourself or the consequences of what you did in Mr. Carlson's classroom. You are disturbed, Charlie."

You are disturbed, Charlie.

The Cherokees used to slit their noses…so everyone in the tribe could see what part of them got them in trouble.

The words echoed greenly in my head, as if at great depths. They were shark words at deep fathoms, jaws words come to gobble me. Words with teeth and eyes.

This is where I started to get it on. I knew it, because the same thing that happened just before I gave Mr. Carlson the business was happening now. My hands stopped shaking. My stomach flutters subsided, and my whole middle felt cool and calm. I felt detached, not only from Mr. Denver and his overshaved neck, but from myself. I could almost float.

Mr. Denver had gone on, something about proper counseling and psychiatric help, but I interrupted him. "Mr. Man, you can go straight to hell."

He stopped and put down the paper he had been looking at so he wouldn't have to look at me. Something from my file, no doubt. The almighty file. The Great American File.

"*What?*" he said.

“In hell. Judge not, lest ye be judged. Any insanity in your family, Mr. Denver?”

I’ll discuss this with you, Charlie,” he said tightly. “I won’t engage in—”

“…immoral sex practices,” I finished for him. “Just you and me, okay? First one to jack off wins the Putnam Good Fellowship Award. Fill yore hand, pardner. Get Mr. Grace in here, that’s even better. We’ll have a circle jerk.”

“Wh—

“Don’t you get the message? You have to pull it out sometime, right? You owe it to yourself, right? Everybody has to get it on, everybody has to have someone to jack off on. You’ve already set yourself up as Judge of What’s Right for Me. Devils. Demon possession. Why did I hit dat l’il girl wit dat ball bat, Lawd, Lawd? De debbil made me do it, and I’m so *saw-ry.* Why don’t you admit it? You get a kick out of peddling my flesh. I’m the best thing that’s happened to you since 1959.”

He was gawping at me openly. I had him by the short hair, knew it, was savagely proud of it. On the one hand, he wanted to humor me, go along with me, because after all, isn’t that what you do with disturbed people? On the other hand, he was in the kid business, just like he told me, and Rule One in the kid business is: Don’t Let ‘Em Give You No Lip—be fast with the command and the snappy comeback.

“Charlie—”

“Don’t bother. I’m trying to tell you I’m tired of being masturbated on. Be a man, for God’s sake, Mr. Denver. And if you can’t be a man, at least pull up your pants and be a principal.”

“Shut up,” he grunted. His face had gone bright red. “You’re just pretty damn lucky you live in a progressive state and go to a progressive school, young man. You know where you’d be otherwise? Peddling your papers in a reformatory somewhere, serving a term for criminal assault. I’m not sure you don’t belong there anyway. You—”

“Thank you,” I said.

He stared at me, his angry blue eyes fixed on mine.

“For treating me like a human being even if I had to piss you off to do it. That’s real progress.” I crossed my legs, being nonchalant. “Want to talk about the panty raids you made the scene at while you were at Big U learning the kid business?”

“Your mouth is filthy,” he said deliberately. “And so is your mind.”

“Fuck you,” I said, and laughed at him.

He went an even deeper shade of scarlet and stood up. He reached slowly over the desk, slowly, slowly, as if he needed oiling, and bunched the shoulder of my shirt in his hand. “You show some respect,” he said. He had really blown his cool and was not even bothering to use that really first-class grunt. “You rotten little punk, you show me some respect.”

“I could show you my ass and you’d kiss it,” I said. “Go on and tell me about the panty raids. You’ll feel better. Throw us your panties! Throw us your panties!”

He let go of me, holding his hand away from his body as if a rabid dog had just pooped on it. “Get out,” he said hoarsely. “Get your books, turn them in here, and then get out. Your expulsion and transfer to Greenmantle Academy is effective as of Monday. I’ll talk to your parents on the telephone. Now get out. I don’t want to have to look at you.”

I got up, unbuttoned the two bottom buttons on my shirt, pulled the tail out on one side, and unzipped my fly. Before he could move, I tore open the door and staggered into the outer office. Miss Marble and Al Lathrop were conferring at her desk, and they both looked up and winced when they saw me. They had obviously both been playing the great American parlor game of We Don’t Really Hear Them, Do We?

“You better get to him,” I panted. “We were sitting there talking about panty raids and he just jumped over his desk and tried to rape me.”

I’d pushed him over the edge, no mean feat, considering he’d been in the kid business for twenty-nine years and was probably only ten away from getting his gold key to the downstairs crapper. He lunged at me through the door; I danced away from him and he stood there looking furious, silly, and guilty all at once.

“Get somebody to take care of him,” I said. “He’ll be sweeter after he gets it out of his system.” I looked at Mr. Denver, winked, and whispered, “Throw us your panties, right?”

Then I pushed out through the slatted rail and walked slowly out the office door, buttoning my shirt and tucking it in, zipping my fly. There was plenty of time for him to say something, but he didn’t say a word.

That’s when it really got rolling, because all at once I knew he couldn’t say a word. He was great at announcing the day’s hot lunch over the

intercom, but this was a different thing joyously different. I had confronted him with exactly what he said was wrong with me, and he hadn't been able to cope with that. Maybe he expected us to smile and shake hands and conclude my seven-and-one-half-semester stay at Placerville High with a literary critique of *The Bugle.* But in spite of everything, Mr. Carlson and all the rest, he hadn't really expected any irrational act. Those things were all meant for the closet, rolled up beside those nasty magazines you never show your wife. He was standing back there, vocal cords frozen, not a word left in his mind to say. None of his instructors in Dealing with the Disturbed Child, EdB-211, had ever told him he might someday have to deal with a student who would attack him on a personal level.

And pretty quick he was going to be mad. That made him dangerous. Who knew better than me? I was going to have to protect myself. I was ready, and had been ever since I decided that people might—just might, mind you—be following me around and checking up.

I gave him every chance.

I waited for him to charge out and grab me, all the way to the staircase. I didn't want salvation. I was either past that point or never reached it. All I wanted was recognition…or maybe for someone to draw a yellow plague circle around my feet.

He didn't come out.

And when he didn't, I went ahead and got it on.

Chapter 7

I went down the staircase whistling; I felt wonderful. Things happen that way sometimes. When everything is at its worst, your mind just throws it all into the wastebasket and goes to Florida for a little while. There is a sudden electric what-the-hell glow as you stand there looking back over your shoulder at the bridge you just burned down.

A girl I didn't know passed me on the second-floor landing, a pimply, ugly girl wearing big horn-rimmed glasses and carrying a clutch of secretarial-type books. On impulse I turned around and looked after her. Yes; yes. From the back she might have been Miss America. It was wonderful.

Chapter 8

The first-floor hall was deserted. Not a soul coming or going. The only sound was the hive drone, the sound that makes all the schoolhouses the same, modern and glass-walled or ancient and stinking of floor varnish. Lockers stood in silent sentinel rows, with a break here and there to make room for a drinking fountain or a classroom door.

Algebra II was in Room 16, but my locker was at the other end of the hall. I walked down to it and regarded it.

My locker. It said so: CHARLES DECKER printed neatly in my hand on a strip of school Con-Tact paper. Each September, during the first home-room period, came the handing out of the blank Con-Tact strips. We lettered carefully, and during the two-minute break between home room and the first class of the new year, we pasted them on. The ritual was as old and as holy as First Communion. On the first day of my sophomore year, Joe McKennedy walked up to me through the crowded hall with his Con-Tact strip pasted on his forehead and a big shit-eating grin pasted on his mouth. Hundreds of horrified freshmen, each with a little yellow name tag pinned on his or her shirt or blouse, turned to look at this sacrilege. I almost broke my balls laughing. Of course he got a detention for it, but it made my day. When I think back on it, I guess it made my year.

And there I was, right between ROSANNE DEBBINS and CARLA DENCH, who doused herself in rosewater every morning, which had been no great help in keeping my breakfast where it belonged during the last semester.

Ah, but all that was behind me now.

Gray locker, five feet high, padlocked. The padlocks were handed out at the beginning of the year along with the Con-Tact strips. Titus, the padlock proclaimed itself. Lock me, unlock me. I am Titus, the Helpful Padlock.

"Titus, you old cuffer," I whispered. "Titus, you old cock-knocker."

I reached for Titus, and it seemed to me that my hand stretched to it across a thousand miles, a hand on the end of a plastic arm that elongated painlessly and nervelessly. The numbered surface of Titus' black face looked at me blandly, not condemning but certainly not *approving,* no, not *that,* and I shut my eyes for a moment. My body wrenched through a shudder, pulled by invisible, involuntary, opposing hands.

And when I opened my eyes again, Titus was in my grasp. The chasm had closed.

The combinations on high-school locks are simple. Mine was six to the left, thirty right, and two turns back to zero. Titus was known more for his strength than his intellect. The lock snapped up, and I had him in my hand. I clutched him tightly, making no move to open the locker door.

Up the hall, Mr. Johnson was saying: "…and the Hessians, who were paid mercenaries, weren't any too anxious to fight, especially in a countryside where the opportunities for plunder over and above the agreed-upon wages…"

"Hessian," I whispered to Titus. I carried him down to the first wastebasket and dropped him in. He looked up at me innocently from a litter of discarded homework papers and old sandwich bags.

"…but remember that the Hessians, as far as the Continental Army knew, were formidable German killing machines…"

I bent down, picked him up, and put him in my breast pocket, where he made a bulge about the size of a pack of cigarettes.

"Keep it in mind, Titus, you old killing machine," I said, and went back to my locker.

I swung it open. Crumpled up in a sweaty ball at the bottom was my gym uniform, old lunch bags, candy wrappers, a month-old apple core that was browning nicely, and a pair of ratty black sneakers. My red nylon jacket was hung on the coat-hook, and on the shelf above that were my textbooks, all but Algebra II. Civics, American Government, French Stories and Fables, and Health, that happy Senior gut course, a red, modern book with a high-school girl and boy on the cover and the section on venereal disease

neatly clipped by unanimous vote of the School Committee. I started to get it on beginning with the health book, sold to the school by none other than good old Al Lathrop, I hoped and trusted. I took it out, opened it somewhere between "The Building Blocks of Nutrition" and "Swimming Rules for Fun and Safety," and ripped it in two. It came easy. They all came easy except for Civics, which was a tough old Silver Burdett text circa 1946. I threw all the pieces into the bottom of the locker. The only thing left up top was my slide rule, which I snapped in two, a picture of Raquel Welch taped to the back wall (I let it stay), and the box of shells that had been behind my books.

I picked that up and looked at it. The box had originally held Winchester .22 long-rifle shells, but it didn't anymore. I'd put the other shells in it, the ones from the desk drawer in my father's study. There's a deer head mounted on the wall in his study, and it stared down at me with its glassy too-alive eyes as I took the shells and the gun, but I didn't let it bother me. It wasn't the one he'd gotten on the hunting trip when I was nine. The pistol had been in another drawer, behind a box of business envelopes. I doubt if he even remembered it was still there. And as a matter of fact, it wasn't, not anymore. Now it was in the pocket of my jacket. I took it out and shoved it into my belt. I didn't feel much like a Hessian. I felt like Wild Bill Hickok.

I put the shells in my pants pocket and took out my lighter. It was one of those Scripto see-through jobs. I don't smoke myself, but the lighter had kind of caught my fancy. I snapped a light to it, squatted, and set the crap in the bottom of my locker on fire.

The flames licked up greedily from my gym trunks to the lunch bags and candy wrappers to the ruins of my books, carrying a sweaty, athletic smell up to me.

Then, figuring that I had gotten it on as much as I could by myself, I shut the locker door. There were little vents just above where my name was Con-Tact-papered on, and through them I could hear the flames whooshing upward. In a minute little orange flecks were glaring in the darkness beyond the vents, and the gray locker paint started to crack and peel.

A kid came out of Mr. Johnson's room carrying a green bathroom pass. He looked at the smoke belching merrily out of the vents in my locker, looked at me, and hurried down to the bathroom. I don't think he saw the pistol. He wasn't hurrying that fast.

I started down to Room 16. I paused just as I got there, my hand on the doorknob, looking back. The smoke was really pouring out of the vents now, and a dark, sooty stain was spreading up the front of my locker. The Con-Tact paper had turned brown. You couldn't see the letters that made my name anymore.

I don't think there was anything in my brain fight then except the usual background static—the kind you get on your radio when it's turned up all the way and tuned to no station at all. My brain had checked to the power, so to speak; the little guy wearing the Napoleon hat inside was showing aces and betting them.

I turned back to Room 16 and opened the door. I was hoping, but I didn't know what.

Chapter 9

"...So you understand that when we *increase* the number of variables, the axioms *themselves* never change. For example—"

Mrs. Underwood looked up alertly, pushing her harlequin glasses up on her nose. "Do you have an office pass, Mr. Decker?"

"Yes," I said, and took the pistol out of my belt. I wasn't even sure it was loaded until it went off. I shot her in the head. Mrs. Underwood never knew what hit her, I'm sure. She fell sideways onto her desk and then rolled onto the floor, and that expectant expression never left her face.

Chapter 10

Sanity:

You can go through your whole life telling yourself that life is logical, life is prosaic, life is sane. Above all, sane. And I think it is. I've had a lot of time to think about that. And what I keep coming back to is Mrs. Underwood's dying declaration: *So you understand that when we increase the number of variables, the axioms themselves never change.*

I really believe that.

I think; therefore I am. There are hairs on my face; therefore I shave. My wife and child have been critically injured in a car crash; therefore I pray. It's all logical, it's all sane. We live in the best of all possible worlds, so hand me a Kent for my left, a Bud for my right, turn on *Starsky and Hutch,* and listen to that soft, harmonious note that is the universe turning smoothly on its celestial gyros. Logic and sanity. Like Coca-Cola, it's the real thing.

But as Warner Brothers, John D. MacDonald, and Long Island Dragway know so well, there's a Mr. Hyde for every happy Jekyll face, a dark face on the other side of the mirror. The brain behind that face never heard of razors, prayers, or the logic of the universe. You turn the mirror sideways and see your face reflected with a sinister left-hand twist, half mad and half sane. The astronomers call that line between light and dark the terminator.

The other side says that the universe has all the logic of a little kid in a Halloween cowboy suit with his guts and his trick-or-treat candy spread all over a mile of Interstate 95. This is the logic of napalm, paranoia, suitcase bombs carried by happy Arabs, random carcinoma. This logic eats itself. It

says life is a monkey on a stick, it says life spins as hysterically and erratically as the penny you flick to see who buys lunch.

No one looks at that side unless they have to, and I can understand that. You look at it if you hitch a ride with a drunk in a GTO who puts it up to one-ten and starts blubbering about how his wife turned him out; you look at it if some guy decides to drive across Indiana shooting kids on bicycles; you look at it if your sister says "I'm going down to the store for a minute, big guy" and then gets killed in a stickup. You look at it when you hear your dad talking about slitting your mom's nose.

It's a roulette wheel, but anybody who says the game is rigged is whining. No matter how many numbers there are, the principle of that little white jittering ball never changes. Don't say it's crazy. It's all so cool and sane.

And all that weirdness isn't just going on outside. It's in you too, right now, growing in the dark like magic mushrooms. Call it the Thing in the Cellar. Call it the Blow Lunch Factor. Call it the Loony Tunes File. I think of it as my private dinosaur, huge, slimy, and mindless, stumbling around in the stinking swamp of my subconscious, never finding a tarpit big enough to hold it.

But that's me, and I started to tell you about *them,* those bright college-bound students that, metaphorically speaking, walked down to the store to get milk and ended up in the middle of an armed robbery. I'm a documented case, routine grist for the newspaper mill. A thousand newsboys hawked me on a thousand street corners. I had fifty seconds on Chancellor-Brinkley and a column and a half in *Time.* And I stand here before you (metaphorically speaking, again) and tell you I'm perfectly sane. I do have one slightly crooked wheel upstairs, but everything else is ticking along just four-o, thank you very much.

So, them. How do you understand *them?* We have to discuss that, don't we?

"Do you have an office pass, Mr. Decker?" she asked me.

"Yes," I said, and took the pistol out of my belt. I wasn't even sure it was loaded until it went off. I shot her in the head. Mrs. Underwood never knew what hit her, I'm sure. She fell sideways onto her desk and then rolled onto the floor, and that expectant expression never left her face.

I'm the sane one: I'm the croupier, I'm the guy who spins the ball against the spin of the wheel. The guy who lays his money on odd/even, the girl who lays her money on black/red…what about *them?*

There isn't any division of time to express the marrow of our lives, the time between the explosion of lead from the muzzle and the meat impact, between the impact and the darkness. There's only barren instant replay that shows nothing new.

I shot her; she fell; and there was an indescribable moment of silence, an infinite duration of time, and we all stepped back, watching the ball go around and around, ticking, bouncing, lighting for an instant, going on, heads and tails, red and black, odd and even.

I think that moment ended. I really do. But sometimes, in the dark, I think that hideous random moment is still going on, that the wheel is even yet in spin, and I dreamed all the rest.

What must it be like for a suicide coming down from a high ledge? I'm sure it must be a very sane feeling. That's probably why they scream all the way down.

Chapter 11

If someone had screamed something melodramatic at that precise moment, something like *Oh, my God, he's going to kill us all!* it would have been over right there. They would have bolted like sheep, and somebody aggressive like Dick Keene would have belted me over the head with his algebra book, thereby earning a key to the city and the Good Citizenship Award.

But nobody said a word. They sat in utter stunned silence, looking at me attentively, as if I had just announced that I was going to tell them how they could all get passes to the Placerville Drive-In this Friday night.

I shut the classroom door, crossed the room, and sat behind the big desk. My legs weren't so good. I was almost to the point of sit down or fall down. I had to push Mrs. Underwood's feet out of the way to get my own feet into the kneehole. I put the pistol down on her green blotter, shut her algebra book, and put it with the others that were stacked neatly on the desk's corner.

That was when Irma Bates broke the silence with a high, gobbling scream that sounded like a young tom turkey getting its neck wrung on the day before Thanksgiving. But it was too late; everyone had taken that endless moment to consider the facts of life and death. Nobody picked up on her scream, and she stopped, as if ashamed at screaming while school was in session, no matter how great the provocation. Somebody cleared his throat. Somebody in the back of the room said "Hum!" in a mildly judicial tone. And John "Pig Pen" Dano slithered quietly out of his seat and slumped to the floor in a dead faint.

They looked up at me from the trough of shock.

"This," I said pleasantly, "is known as getting it on."

Footsteps pounded down the hall, and somebody asked somebody else if something had exploded in the chemistry lab. While somebody else was saying he didn't know, the fire alarm went off stridently. Half the kids in the class started to get up automatically.

"That's all right," I said. "It's just my locker. On fire. I set it on fire, that is. Sit down."

The ones that had started to get up sat down obediently. I looked for Sandra Cross. She was in the third row, fourth seat, and she did not seem afraid. She looked like what she was. An intensely exciting Good Girl.

Lines of students were filing out onto the grass; I could see them through the windows. The squirrel was gone, though. Squirrels make lousy innocent bystanders.

The door was snatched open, and I picked up the gun. Mr. Vance poked his head in. "Fire alarm," he said. "Everybody…Where's Mrs. Underwood?"

"Get out," I said.

He stared at me. He was a very porky man, and his hair was neatly crew cut. It looked as if some landscape artist had trimmed it carefully with hedge clippers. "What? What did you say?"

"Out." I shot at him and missed. The bullet whined off the upper edge of the door, chipping wood splinters.

"Jesus," somebody in the front row said mildly.

Mr. Vance didn't know what was happening. I don't think any of them did. It all reminded me of an article I read about the last big earthquake in California. It was about a woman who was wandering from room to room while her house was being shaken to pieces all around her, yelling to her husband to please unplug the fan.

Mr. Vance decided to go back to the beginning. "There's a fire in the building. Please—"

"Charlie's got a gun, Mr. Vance," Mike Gavin said in a discussing-the-weather tone. "I think you better—"

The second bullet caught him in the throat. His flesh spread liquidly like water spreads when you throw a rock in it. He walked backward into the hall, scratching at his throat, and fell over.

Irma Bates screamed again, but again she had no takers. If it had been Carol Granger, there would have been imitators galore, but who wanted to be in concert with poor old Irma Bates? She didn't even have a boyfriend. Besides, everyone was too busy peeking at Mr. Vance, whose scratching motions were slowing down.

"Ted," I said to Ted Jones, who sat closest to the door. "Shut that and lock it."

"What do you think you're doing?" Ted asked. He was looking at me with a kind of scared and scornful distaste.

"I don't know all the details just yet," I said. "But shut the door and lock it, okay?"

Down the hall someone was yelling: "It's in a locker! It's in a Vance's had a heart attack! Get some water! Get…"

Ted Jones got up, shut the door, and locked it. He was a tall boy wearing wash-faded Levi's and an army shirt with flap pockets. He looked very fine. I had always admired Ted, although he was never part of the circle I traveled in. He drove last year's Mustang, which his father had given him, and didn't get any parking tickets, either. He combed his hair in an out-of-fashion DA, and I bet his was the face that Irma Bates called up in her mind when she sneaked a cucumber out of the refrigerator in the wee hours of the night. With an all-American name like Ted Jones he couldn't very well miss, either. His father was vice-president of the Placerville Bank and Trust.

"Now what?" Hannon Jackson asked. He sounded bewildered.

"Um." I put the pistol down on the blotter again. "Well, somebody try and bring Pig Pen around. He'll get his shirt dirty. Dirtier, I mean."

Sarah Pasterne started to giggle hysterically and clapped her hand over her mouth. George Yannick, who sat close to Pig Pen, squatted down beside him and began to pat his cheeks. Pig Pen moaned, opened his eyes, rolled them, and said, "He shot Book Bags."

There were several hysterical laughs this time. They went off around the room like popping corn. Mrs. Underwood had two plastic briefcases with tartan patterns on them, which she carried into each class. She had also been known as Two-Gun Sue.

Pig Pen settled shakily into his seat, rolled his eyes again, and began to cry.

Somebody pounded up to the door, rattled the knob, and yelled, “Hey! Hey in there!” It looked like Mr. Johnson, who had been talking about the Hessians. I picked up the pistol and put a bullet through the chicken-wired glass. It made a neat little hole beside Mr. Johnson’s head, and Mr. Johnson went out of sight like a crash-diving submarine. The class (with the possible exception of Ted) watched all the action with close interest, as if they had stumbled into a pretty good movie by accident.

“Somebody in there’s got a gun!” Mr. Johnson yelled. There was a faint bumping sound as he crawled away. The fire alarm buzzed hoarsely on and on.

“Now what?” Harmon Jackson asked again. He was a small boy, usually with a big cockeyed grin on his face, but now he looked helpless, all at sea.

I couldn’t think of an answer to that, so I let it pass. Outside, kids were milling restlessly around on the lawn, talking and pointing at Room 16 as the grapevine passed the word among them. After a little bit, some teachers–the men teachers—began shooing them back toward the gymnasium end of the building.

In town the fire whistle on the Municipal Building began to scream, rising and falling in hysterical cycles.

“It’s like the end of the world,” Sandra Cross said softly.

I had no answer for that, either.

Chapter 12

No one said anything for maybe five minutes—not until the fire engines got to the high school. They looked at me, and I looked at them. Maybe they still could have bolted, and they're still asking me why they didn't. *Why didn't they cut and run, Charlie? What did you do to them?* Some of them ask that almost fearfully, as if I had the evil eye. I don't answer them. I don't answer any questions about what happened that morning in Room 16. But if I told them anything, it would be that they've forgotten what it is to be a kid, to live cheek-by-jowl with violence, with the commonplace fistfights in the gym, brawls at the PAL hops in Lewiston, beatings on television, murders in the movies. Most of us had seen a little girl puke pea soup all over a priest right down at our local drive-in. Old Book Bags wasn't much shakes by comparison.

I'm not taking on any of those things, hey, I'm in no shape for crusades these days. I'm just telling you that American kids labor under a huge life of violence, both real and make-believe. Besides, I was kind of interesting: Hey, Charlie Decker went apeshit today, didja hear? No! Did he? Yeah. Yeah. I was there. It was just like *Bonnie and Clyde,* except Charlie's got zitzes and there wasn't any popcorn.

I know they thought they'd be all right. That's part of it. What I wonder about is this: Were they hoping I'd get somebody else?

Another shrieking sound had joined the fire siren, this one getting closer real fast. Not the cops. It was that hysterical yodeling note that is all the latest rage in ambulances and paramedic vehicles these days. I've always thought the day will come when all the disaster vehicles will get smart and

stop scaring the almighty shit out of everyone they're coming to save. When there's a fire or an accident or a natural disaster like me, the red vehicles will rush to the scene accompanied by the amplified sound of the Darktown Strutters playing "Banjo Rag." Someday. Oh, boy.

Chapter 13

Seeing as how it was the school, the town fire department went whole hog. The fire chief came first, gunning into the big semicircular school driveway in his blue bubble-topped Ford Pinto. Behind him was a hook-and-ladder trailing firemen like battle banners. There were two pumpers behind that.

"You going to let them in?" Jack Goldman asked.

"The fire's out there," I said. "Not in here."

"Did you shut ya locka door?" Sylvia Ragan asked. She was a big blond girl with great soft cardiganed breasts and gently rotting teeth.

"Yes."

"Prolly out already, then."

Mike Gavin looked at the scurrying firemen and snickered. "Two of 'em just ran into each other," he said. "Holy moly."

The two downed firemen untangled themselves, and the whole group was preparing to charge into the inferno when two suit-coated figures ran over to them. One was Mr. Johnson, the Human Submarine, and the other was Mr. Grace. They were talking hard and fast to the fire chief.

Great rolls of hose with shiny nozzles were being unreeled from the pumpers and dragged toward the front doors. The fire chief turned around and yelled, "Hold it!" They stood irresolutely on the lawn, their nozzles gripped and held out before them like comic brass phalluses.

The fire chief was still in conference with Mr. Johnson and Mr. Grace. Mr. Johnson pointed at Room 16. Thomas Denver, the Principal with the Amazing Overshaved Neck, ran over and joined the discussion. It was

starting to look like a pitcher's mound conference in the last half of the ninth.

"I want to go home!" Irma Bates said wildly.

"Blow it out," I said.

The fire chief had started to gesture toward his knights again, and Mr. Grace shook his head angrily and put a hand on his shoulder. He turned to Denver and said something to him. Denver nodded and ran toward the main doors.

The chief was nodding reluctantly. He went back to his car, rummaged in the back seat, and came up with a really nice Radio Shack battery-powered bullhorn. I bet they had some real tussles back at the fire station about who got to use that. Today the chief was obviously pulling rank. He pointed it at the milling students.

"Please move away from the building. I repeat. Will you please move away from the building. Move up to the shoulder of the highway. Move up to the shoulder of the highway. We will have buses here to pick you up shortly. School is canceled for—"

Short, bewildered whoop.

'…for the remainder of the day. Now, please move away from the building."

A bunch of teachers—both men and women this time—started herding them up toward the road. They were craning and babbling. I looked for Joe McKennedy but didn't see him anywhere.

"Is it all right to do homework?" Melvin Thomas asked tremblingly. There was a general laugh. They seemed surprised to hear it.

"Go ahead." I thought for a moment and added: "If you want to smoke, go ahead and do it."

A couple of them grabbed for their pockets. Sylvia Ragan, doing her lady-of-the-manor bit, fished a battered pack of Camels delicately out of her purse and lit up with leisurely elegance. She blew out a plume of smoke and dropped her match on the floor. She stretched out her legs, not bothering overmuch with the nuisance of her skirt. She looked comfy.

There had to be more, though. I was getting along pretty well, but there had to be a thousand things I wasn't thinking of. Not that it mattered.

"If you've got a friend you want to sit next to, go ahead and change around. But don't try to rush at me or run out the door, please."

A couple of kids changed next to their buddies, walking quickly and softly, but most of them just sat quiet. Melvin Thomas had opened his algebra book but couldn't seem to concentrate on it. He was staring at me glassily.

There was a faint metallic *chink!* from the upper corner of the room. Somebody had just opened the intercom system.

"Hello," Denver said. "Hello, Room 16."

"Hello," I said.

"Who's that?"

"Charlie Decker."

Long pause. Finally: "What's going on down there, Decker?"

I thought it over. "I guess I'm going berserk," I said.

An even longer pause. Then, almost rhetorically: "What have you done?"

I motioned at Ted Jones. He nodded back at me politely. "Mr. Denver?"

"Who's that?"

"Ted Jones, Mr. Denver. Charlie has a gun. He's holding us hostage. He's killed Mrs. Underwood. And I think he killed Mr. Vance, too."

"I'm pretty sure I did," I said.

"Oh," Mr. Denver said.

Sarah Pasterne giggled again.

"Ted Jones?"

"I'm here," Ted told him. He sounded very competent, Ted did, but at the same time distant. Like a first lieutenant who has been to college. You had to admire him.

"Who is in the classroom besides you and Decker?"

"Just a sec," I said. "I'll call the roll. Hold on."

I got Mrs. Underwood's green attendance book and opened it up. "Period two, right?"

"Yeah," Corky said.

"Okay. Here we go. Irma Bates?"

"I want to go *home!*" Irma screamed defiantly.

"She's here," I said. "Susan Brooks?"

"Here."

"Nancy Caskin?"

"Here."

I went through the rest of the roll. There were twenty-five names, and the only absentee was Peter Franklin.

"Has Peter Franklin been shot?" Mr. Denver asked quietly.

"He's got the measles," Don Lordi said. This brought on another attack of the giggles. Ted Jones frowned deeply.

"Decker?"

"Yes."

"Will you let them go?"

"Not right now," I said.

"Why?" There was dreadful concern, a dreadful heaviness in his voice, and for a second I almost caught myself feeling sorry for him. I crushed that quickly. It's like being in a big poker game. Here is this guy who has been winning big all night, he's got a pile of chips that's a mile-high, and all at once he starts to lose. Not a little bit, but a lot, and you want to feel bad for him and his falling empire. But you cram that back and bust him, or you take it in the eye.

So I said, "We haven't finished getting it on down here yet."

"What does that mean?"

"It means stick it," I said. Carol Granger's eyes got round.

"Decker—"

"Call me Charlie. All my friends call me Charlie."

"Decker—"

I held my hand up in front of the class and crossed the fingers in pairs. "If you don't call me Charlie, I'm going to shoot somebody."

Pause.

"Charlie?"

"That's better." In the back row, Mike Gavin and Dick Keene were covering grins. Some of the others weren't bothering to cover them. "You call me Charlie, and I'll call you Tom. That okay, Tom?"

Long, long pause.

"When will you let them go, Charlie? They haven't hurt you."

Outside, one of the town's three black-and-whites and a blue state-police cruiser had arrived. They parked across the road from the high school, and Jerry Kesserling, the chief since Warren Talbot had retired into the local Methodist cemetery in 1975, began directing traffic onto the Oak Hill Pond road.

"Did you hear me, Charlie?"

"Yes. But I can't tell you. I don't know. There are more cops coming, I guess."

"Mr. Wolfe called them," Mr. Denver said. "I imagine there will be a great deal more when they fully appreciate what's going on. They'll have tear gas and Mace, Dec…Charlie. Why make it hard on yourself and your classmates?"

"Tom?"

Grudgingly: "What?"

"You get your skinny cracked ass out there and tell them that the minute anyone shoots tear gas or anything else in here, I am going to make them sorry. You tell them to remember who's driving."

"Why? Why are you doing this?" He sounded angry and impotent and frightened. He sounded like a man who has just discovered there is no place left to pass the buck.

"I don't know," I said, "but it sure beats panty raids, Tom. And I don't think it actually concerns you. All I want you to do is trot back out there and tell them what I said. Will you do that, Tom?"

"I have no choice, do I?"

"No, that's right. You don't. And there's something else, Tom."

"What?" He asked it very hesitantly.

"I don't like you very much, Tom, as you have probably realized, but up to now you haven't had to give much of a rip how I felt. But I'm out of your filing cabinet now, Tom. Have you got it? I'm not just a record you can lock up at three in the afternoon. Have you got it?" My voice was rising into a scream. "HAVE YOU GOT THAT, TOM? HAVE YOU INTERNALIZED THAT PARTICULAR FACT OF LIFE?"

"Yes, Charlie," he said in a deadly voice. "I have it."

"No you don't, Tom. But you will. Before the day's over, we are going to understand all about the difference between people and pieces of paper in a file, and the difference between doing your job and getting jobbed. What do you think of that, Tommy, my man?"

"I think you're a sick boy, Decker."

"No, you think I'm a sick boy, *Charlie.* Isn't that what you meant to say, Tom?"

"Yes…"

"Say it."

"I think you're a sick boy, Charlie." The mechanical, embarrassed rote of a seven-year-old.

"You've got some getting it on to do yourself, Tom. Now, get out there and tell them what I said."

Denver cleared his throat as if he had something else to say, and then the intercom clicked off. A little murmur went through the class. I looked them over very carefully. Their eyes were so cool and somehow detached (shock can do that: you're ejected like a fighter pilot from a humdrum dream of life to a grinding, overloaded slice of the real meat, and your brain refuses to make the adjustment; you can only free-fall and hope that sooner or later your chute will open), and a ghost of grammar school came back to me: *Teacher, teacher, ring the bell, My lessons all to you I'll tell, And when my day at school is through, I'll know more than aught I knew.*

I wondered what they were learning today; what I was learning. The yellow school buses had begun to appear, and our classmates were going home to enjoy the festivities on living-room TVs and pocket transistor radios; but in Room 16, education went on.

I rapped the butt of the pistol sharply on the desk. The murmur died. They were watching me as closely as I was watching them. Judge and jury, or jury and defendant? I wanted to cackle.

"Well," I said, "the shit has surely hit the fan. I think we need to talk a little."

"Private?" George Yannick asked. "Just you and us?" He had an intelligent, perky face, and he didn't look frightened.

"Yes."

"You better turn off that intercom, then."

"You big-mouth son of a bitch," Ted Jones said distinctly. George looked at him, wounded.

There was an uncomfortable silence while I got up and pushed the little lever below the speaker from TALK-LISTEN to LISTEN.

I went back and sat down again. I nodded at Ted. "I was thinking of it anyway," I lied. "You shouldn't take on so."

Ted didn't say anything, but he offered me a strange little grin that made me think he might have been wondering about how I might taste.

“Okay,” I said to the class at large. “I may be crazy, but I’m not going to shoot anyone for discussing this thing with me. Believe it. Don’t be afraid to shoot off your mouths. As long as we don’t all talk at once.” That didn’t look as if it was going to be a problem. “To take the bull by the horns, is there anyone here who really thinks I’m going to just up and murder them?”

A few of them looked uneasy, but nobody said anything.

“Okay. Because I’m not. We’re just going to sit around and bug the hell out of everybody.”

“Yeah, you sure bugged the hell out of Mrs. Underwood,” Ted said. He was still smiling his strange smile.

“I had to. I know that’s hard to understand, but…I had to. It came down to that. And Mr. Vance. But I want everyone here to take it easy. No one is going to shoot the place up, so you don’t have to worry.”

Carol Granger raised her hand timidly. I nodded at her. She was smart, smart as a whip. Class president, and a cinch to speak a piece as valedictorian in June “Our Responsibilities to the Black Race” or maybe “Hopes for the Future.” She was already signed up for one of those big-league women’s colleges where people always wonder how many virgins there are. But I didn’t hold it against her.

“When can we go, Charlie?”

I sighed and shrugged my shoulders. “We’ll just have to wait and see what happens.”

“But my mother will be worried to death!”

“Why?” Sylvia Ragan asked. “She knows where you are, doesn’t she?”

General laugh. Except for Ted Jones. He wasn’t laughing, and I was going to have to watch that boy. He was still smiling his small, savage smile. He wanted badly to blow everything out of the water—obvious enough. But why? Insanity Prevention Merit Badge? Not enough. Adulation of the community in general—the boy who stood on the burning deck with his finger in the dike? It didn’t seem his style. Handsome low profile was Ted’s style. He was the only guy I knew who had quit the football team after three Saturdays of glory in his junior year. The guy who wrote sports for the local rag had called him the best running back Placerville High School had ever produced. But he had quit, suddenly and with no explanation. Amazing enough. What was more amazing was the fact that his popularity quotient hadn’t lost a point. If anything, Ted became more the

local BMOC than ever. Joe McKennedy, who had suffered through four years and one broken nose at left tackle, told me that the only thing Ted would say when the agonized coach demanded an explanation was that football seemed to be a pretty stupid game, and he (Ted) thought that he could find a better way to spend his time. You can see why I respected him, but I was damned if I knew why he wanted me in such a personal way. A little thought on the matter might have helped, but things were going awful fast.

"Are you nuts?" Harmon Jackson asked suddenly.

"I think I must be," I said. "Anyone who kills anyone else is nuts, in my book."

"Well, maybe you ought to give yourself up," Hannon said. "Get some help. A doctor. You know."

"You mean like that Grace?" Sylvia asked. "My God, that creepster. I had to go see him after I threw an inkwell at old lady Green. All he did was look up my dress and try to get me to talk about my sex life."

"Not that you've had any," Pat Fitzgerald said, and there was another laugh.

"And not that it's any business of his or yours," she said haughtily, dropped her cigarette on the floor, and mashed it.

"So what are we going to do?" Jack Goldman asked.

"Just get it on," I said. "That's all."

Out on the lawn, a second town police car had arrived. I guessed that the third one was probably down at Junior's Diner, taking on vital shipments of coffee and doughnuts. Denver was talking with a state trooper in blue pants and one of those almost-Stetsons they wear. Up on the road, Jerry Kesserling was letting a few cars through the roadblock to pick up kids who didn't ride the bus. The cars picked up and then drove hastily away. Mr. Grace was talking to a guy in a business suit that I didn't know. The firemen were standing around and smoking cigarettes and waiting for someone to tell them to put out a fire or go home.

"Has this got anything to do with you beating up Carlson?" Corky asked.

"How should I know what it has to do with?" I asked him irritably. "If I knew what was making me do it, I probably wouldn't have to."

"It's your parents." Susan Brooks spoke up suddenly. "It must be your parents.

Ted Jones made a rude noise.

I looked over at her, surprised. Susan Brooks was one of those girls who never say anything unless called upon, the ones that teachers always have to ask to speak up, please. A very studious, very serious girl. A rather pretty but not terribly bright girl—the kind who isn't allowed to give up and take the general or the commercial courses, because she had a terribly bright older brother or older sister, and teachers expect comparable things from her. In fine, one of those girls who are holding the dirty end of the stick with as much good grace and manners as they can muster. Usually they marry truck drivers and move to the West Coast, where they have kitchen nooks with Formica counters—and they write letters to the Folks Back East as seldom as they can get away with. They make quiet, successful lives for themselves and grow prettier as the shadow of the bright older brother or sister falls away from them.

"My parents," I said, tasting it. I thought about telling them I had been hunting with my dad when I was nine. "My Hunting Trip," by Charles Decker. Subtitle: "Or, How I Overheard My Dad Explain the Cherokee Nose Job." Too revolting.

I snatched a look at Ted Jones, and the rich, coppery aroma of paydirt filled my nostrils. His face was set in a furious, jeering expression, as if someone had just forced a whole lemon into his mouth and then jammed his jaws together. As if someone had dropped a depth charge into his brains and sent some old, sunken hulk into long and ominous psychic vibrations.

"That's what it says in all the psychology books," Susan was going on, all blithely unaware. "In fact…" She suddenly became aware of the fact that she was speaking (and in a normal tone of voice, *and* in class) and clammed up. She was wearing a pale-jade-colored blouse, and her bra straps showed through like ghostly, half-erased chalk marks.

"My parents," I said again, and stopped again. I remembered the hunting trip again, but this time I remembered waking up, seeing the moving branches on the tight canvas of the tent (was the canvas tight? you bet it was—my dad put that tent up, and everything he did was tight, no loose screws there), looking at the moving branches, needing to whiz, feeling like a little kid again…and remembering something that had happened long ago. I didn't want to talk about that. I hadn't talked about it with Mr. Grace. This was getting it on for real—and besides, there was Ted. Ted didn't care for

this at all. Perhaps it was all very important to him. Perhaps Ted could still be…helped. I suspected it was much too late for me, but even on that level, don't they say that learning is a good and elegant thing for its own sake? Sure.

Outside, nothing much seemed to be going on. The last town police car had arrived, and, just as I had expected, they were handing out coffee-and. Story time chilluns.

"My parents," I said:

Chapter 14

My parents met at a wedding reception, and although it may have nothing to do with anything—unless you believe in omens—the bride that day was burned to death less than a year later. Her name was Jessie Decker Hannaford. As Jessie Decker, she had been my mom's roommate at the University of Maine, where they were both majoring in political science. The thing that seemed to have happened was this: Jessie's husband went out to a special town meeting, and Jessie went into the bathroom to take a shower. She fell down and hit her head and knocked herself unconscious. In the kitchen, a dish towel fell on a hot stove burner. The house went up like a rocket. Wasn't it a mercy she didn't suffer.

So the only good that came of that wedding was my mother's meeting with Jessie Decker Hannaford's brother. He was an ensign in the Navy. After the reception, he asked my mother if she would like to go dancing. She said yes. They courted for six months, and then they were married. I came along about fourteen months after the nuptials, and I've done the math again and again. As near as I can figure, I was conceived on one of the nights just before or just after my father's sister was being broiled alive in her shower cap. She was my mom's bridesmaid. I've looked at all the wedding pictures, and no matter how often I've looked, it always gives me a weird feeling. There is Jessie holding my mother's bridal train. Jessie and her husband, Brian Hannaford, smiling in the background as my mom and dad cut the wedding cake. Jessie dancing with the minister. And in all the pictures she is only five months away from the shower and the dishrag on the hot stove burner. You wish you could step into one of those

Kodachromes and approach her, say: “You’re never going to be my aunt Jessie unless you stay out of the shower when your husband is away. Be careful, Aunt Jessie.” But you can’t go back. For want of a shoe the horse was lost, and all that.

But it happened, which is another way of saying I happened, and that’s it. I was an only child; my mother never wanted another. She’s very intellectual, my mother. Reads English mysteries, but never by Agatha Christie. Victor Canning and Hammond Innes were always more her cup of tea. Also magazines like *The Manchester Guardian* and *Monocle* and *The New York Review of Books*. My father, who made a career of the Navy and ended up as a recruiter, was more the all-American type. He likes the Detroit Tigers and the Detroit Redwings and wore a black armband the day Vince Lombardi died. No shit. And he reads those Richard Stark novels about Parker, the thief. That always amused the hell out of my mother. She finally broke down and told him that Richard Stark was really Donald Westlake, who writes sort of funny mysteries under his real name. My father tried one and hated it. After that he always acted like Westlake/Stark was his private lapdog who turned against him one night and tried to bite his throat.

My earliest memory is of waking up in the dark and thinking I was dead until I saw the shadows moving on the walls and the ceiling—there was a big old elm outside my window, and the wind would move the branches. This particular night—the first night I remember anything—there must have been a full moon (hunter’s moon, do they call it?), because the walls were very bright and the shadows were very dark. The branch shadows looked like great moving fingers. Now when I think of it, they seem like corpse fingers. But I couldn’t have thought that then, could I? I was only three. A kid that little doesn’t even know what a corpse is.

But there was something coming. I could hear it, down the hall. Something terrible was coming. Coming for me through the darkness. I could hear it, creaking and creaking and creaking.

I couldn’t move. Maybe I didn’t even want to move. I don’t remember about that. I just lay and watched the tree fingers move on the wall and ceiling, and waited for the Creaking Thing to get down to my room and throw open the door.

After a long time—it might have been an hour, or it might only have been seconds—I realized the Creaking Thing wasn't after me at all. Or at least, not yet. It was after Mom and Dad down the hall. The Creaking Thing was in Mom and Dad's room.

I lay there, watching the tree fingers, and listened. Now the whole thing seems so dreamy and far away, like a city must look from a mountaintop where the air is rare, but very real just the same. I can remember the wind shuffling back and forth against the glass of my bedroom window. I can remember wetting myself—it was warm and somehow comforting. And I can remember the Creaking Thing.

After a long, long, long time, I can remember my mother's voice, out of breath and irritable, and a little afraid: "Stop now, Carl." Again the creaking, furtive. "Stop it!"

A mutter from my father.

From my mother: "I don't care! I don't care if you didn't! Stop it *and* let *me sleep!*"

So I knew. I went to sleep, but I knew. The Creaking Thing was my father.

Chapter 15

Nobody said anything. Some of them hadn't got the point, if there was one; I wasn't sure. They were still looking at me expectantly, as if awaiting the punch line of a rather good joke.

Others were studying their hands, obviously embarrassed. But Susan Brooks looked altogether radiant and vindicated. It was a very nice thing to see. I felt like a farmer, spreading shit and growing corn.

Still nobody said anything. The clock buzzed away with a vague kind of determination. I looked down at Mrs. Underwood. Her eyes were half-open, glazed, gummy. She looked no more important than a woodchuck I had once blown away with my father's four-ten. A fly was unctuously washing its paws on her forearm. Feeling a little disgusted, I waved it away.

Outside, four more police cars had arrived. Other cars were parked along the shoulder of the highway for as far as I could see beyond the roadblock. Quite a crowd was gathering. I sat back, dry-scrubbed the side of my face with my hand, and looked at Ted. He held up his fists to shoulder height, smiled, and popped up the middle fingers on each one.

He didn't speak, but his lips moved, and I read it easily: Shit.

Nobody knew it had been passed but him and me. He looked ready to speak aloud, but I wanted to just keep it between us for a little while. I said:

Chapter 16

My dad has hated me for as long as I can remember.

That's a pretty sweeping statement, and I know how phony it sounds. It sounds petulant and really fantastic—the kind of weapon kids always use when the old man won't come across with the car for your heavy date at the drive-in with Peggy Sue or when he tells you that if you flunk world history the second time through he's going to beat the living hell out of you. In this bright day and age when everybody thinks psychology is God's gift to the poor old anally fixated human race and even the president of the United States pops a trank before dinner, it's really a good way to get rid of those Old Testament guilts that keep creeping up our throats like the aftertaste of a bad meal we overate. If you say your father hated you as a kid, you can go out and flash the neighborhood, commit rape, or burn down the Knights of Pythias bingo parlor and still cop a plea.

But it also means that no one will believe you if it's true. You're the little boy that cried wolf. And for me it is true. Oh, nothing really stunning until after the Carlson thing. I don't think Dad himself really knew it until then. Even if you could dig to the very bottom of his motives, he'd probably say—at the most—that he was hating me for my own good.

Metaphor time in the old corral: To Dad, life was like a precious antique car. Because it is both precious and irreplaceable, you keep it immaculate and in perfect running order. Once a year you take it to the local Old Car Show. No grease is ever allowed to foul the gasoline, no sludge to find its way into the carb, no bolt to loosen on the driveshaft. It must be tuned, oiled, and greased every thousand miles, and you have to wax it every

Sunday, just before the pro game on TV. My dad's motto: Keep It Tight and Keep It Right. And if a bird shits on your windshield, you wipe it off before it can dry there.

That was Dad's life, and I was the birdshit on his windshield.

He was a big, quiet man with sandy hair, a complexion that burned easily, and a face that had a vague—but not unpleasant—touch of the simian. In the summertime he always looked angry, with his face sunburned red and his eyes peering belligerently out at you like pale glints of water. Later, after I was ten, he was transferred to Boston and we saw him only on weekends, but before that he was stationed in Portland, and as far as I was concerned, he was like any other nine-to-five father, except that his shirt was khaki instead of white, and his tie was always black.

It says in the Bible that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the sons, and that may be true. But I could also add that the sins of other fathers' sons were visited on me. Being a recruiting chief was very tough on Dad, and I often thought he would have been much happier stationed out to sea—not to mention how much happier I would have been. For him it was like having to go around and see other people's priceless antique cars driven to rack and ruin, mud-splattered, rust-eaten. He in ducted high-school Romeos leaving their pregnant Juliets behind them. He in ducted men who didn't know what they were getting into and men who only cared about what they were getting out of. He got the sullen young men who had been made to choose between a bang in the Navy and a bang in South Portland Training and Correction. He got scared bookkeepers who had turned up 1-A and would have done anything to keep away from the gooks in Nam, who were just then beginning their long-running special on Pickled Penis of American Grunt. And he got the slack jawed dropouts who had to be coached before they could sign their own names and had IQs to match their hat sizes.

And there was me, right there at home, with some budding characteristics attributable to all of the above. Quite a challenge there. And you have to know that he didn't hate me just because I was there; he hated me because he was unequal to the challenge. He might have been if I hadn't been more my mother's child than his, and if my mother and I hadn't both known that. He called me a mamma's boy. Maybe I was.

One day in the fall of 1962 I took it into my head to throw rocks at the storm windows Dad was getting ready to put on. It was early October, a

Saturday, and Dad was going at it the way he went at everything, with a step-by-step precision that precluded all error and waste.

First he got all the windows out of the garage (newly painted the spring before, green to match the house trim) and lined them up carefully against the house, one beside each window. I can see him, tall and sunburned and angry-looking, even under the cool October sun, in the vintage October air, which was as cool as kisses. October is such a fine month.

I was sitting on the bottom step of the front porch, playing Quiet and watching him. Every now and then a car would blip by going up Route 9 toward Winsor or down 9 toward Harlow or Freeport. Mom was inside, playing the piano. Something minor-Bach, I think. But then, whatever Mother played usually sounded like Bach. The wind tugged and pushed it, now bringing it to me, now carrying it away. Whenever I hear that piece now, I think about that day. Bach Fugue for Storm Windows in A Minor.

I sat and played Quiet. A 1956 Ford with an out-of-state license plate went by. Up here to shoot partridge and pheasant, probably. A robin landed by the elm tree that threw shadows on my bedroom wall at night, and pecked through the fallen leaves for a worm. My mother played on, right hand rippling the melody, left hand counterpointing it. Mother could play wonderful boogie-woogie when the urge struck her, but it didn't often. She just didn't like it, and it was probably just as well. Even her boogies sounded like Bach wrote them.

All at once it occurred to me how wonderful it would be to break all those storm windows. To break them one by one; the upper panes, and then the lower ones.

You might think it was a piece of revenge, conscious or unconscious, a way to get back at the spit-and-polish, all-hands-on-deck old man. But the truth is, I can't remember putting my father in that particular picture at all. The day was fine and beautiful. I was four. It was a fine October day for breaking windows.

I got up and went out to the soft shoulder and began picking up stones. I was wearing short pants, and I stuffed stones into the front pockets until it must have looked like I was carrying ostrich eggs. Another car went by, and I waved. The driver waved back. The woman beside him was holding a baby.

I went back across the lawn, took a stone out of my pocket, and threw it at the storm window beside the living-room window. I threw it as hard as I could. I missed. I took out another rock, and this time I moved right up on top of that window. A little chill went through my mind, disturbing my thoughts for a tiny moment. I couldn't miss. And didn't.

I went right around the house breaking windows. First the living-room window, then the music-room window. It was propped up against the brick side of the house, and after I broke it I looked in at Mom, playing the piano. She was wearing a sheer blue slip. When she saw me peering in, she jumped a little and hit a sour note, then she gave me a big sweet smile and went on playing. You can see how it was. She hadn't even heard me break the window.

Funny, in a way—there was no sense of doing anything wrong, just of doing something pleasurable. A little kid's selective perception is a strange thing; if the windows had been fastened on, I never would have dreamed of breaking them.

I was regarding the last window, the one outside the den, when a hand fell on my shoulder and turned me around. It was my father. He was mad. I hadn't ever seen him so mad. His eyes were big, and he was biting his tongue between his teeth as if he were having a fit. I cried out, he scared me so bad. It was like your mother coming to the breakfast table with a Halloween mask on.

"Bastard!"

He picked me up in both hands, right hand holding my legs at the ankles and left hand holding my left arm against my chest, and then he threw me on the ground. It was hard—as hard as he could throw, I think. I lay there with all the breath out of me, staring up at the dismay and realization creeping over his face, dissolving the flash of his anger. I was unable to cry or speak or even move my diaphragm. There was a paralyzing pain in my chest and my crotch.

"I didn't mean it," he said, kneeling over me. "You all right? You okay, Chuck?" Chuck was what he called me when we were playing toss in the backyard.

My lungs operated in a spasmodic, lurching gasp. I opened my mouth and let out a huge, screaming bray. The sound scared me, and the next

scream was even louder. Tears turned everything to prisms. The sound of the piano stopped.

"You shouldn't have broken those windows," he said. Anger was replacing dismay. "Now, shut up. Be a man, for God's sake."

He jerked me roughly to my feet just as Mom flew around the comer of the house, still in her slip.

"He broke all the storm windows," my father said. "Go put something on."

"What's the matter?" she cried. "Oh, Charlie, did you cut yourself? Where? Show me where!"

"He isn't cut," Dad said disgustedly. "He's afraid he's going to get licked. And he damned well is."

I ran to my mother and pressed my face into her belly, feeling the soft, comforting silk of her slip, smelling her sweet smell. My whole head felt swollen and pulpy, like a turnip. My voice had turned into a cracked donkey bray. I closed my eyes tightly.

"What are you talking about, licking him? He's purple! If you've hurt him, Carl…"

"He started to cry when he saw me coming, for Christ's sake."

The voices were coming from high above me, like amplified declarations from mountaintops.

"There's a car coming," he said. "Go inside, Rita."

"Come on, love," my mother said. "Smile for mummy. Big smile." She pushed me away from her stomach and wiped tears from under my eyes. Have you ever had your mother wipe your tears away? About that the hack poets are right. It's one of life's great experiences, right up there with your first ball game and your first wet dream. "There, honey, there. Daddy didn't mean to be cross."

"That was Sam Castinguay and his wife," my father said. "Now you've given that motor-mouth something to talk about. I hope—"

"Come on, Charlie," she said, taking my hand. "We'll have chocolate. In my sewing room."

"The hell you will," Dad said curtly. I looked back at him. His fists were clenched angrily as he stood in front of the one window he had saved. "He'll just puke it up when I whale the tar out of him."

“You’ll whale no tar out of anyone,” she said. “You’ve scared him half to death already…”

Then he was over to her, not minding her slip anymore, or Sam and his wife. He grabbed her shoulder and pointed to the jagged kitchen storm window. “Look! Look! *He* did that, and now you want to give him chocolate! He’s no baby anymore, Rita, it’s time for you to stop giving him the tit!”

I cringed against her hip, and she wrenched her shoulder away. White fingermarks stood out on her flesh for a moment and then filled in red.

“Go inside,” she said calmly. “You’re being quite foolish, Carl.”

“I’m going to—”

“Don’t tell me what you’ll do!” she shouted suddenly, advancing on him. He flinched away instinctively. “Go inside! You’ve done enough damage! Go inside! Go find some of your friends and have drinks! Go anywhere! *But…get out of my sight!*”

“Punishment,” he said deliberately. “Did anyone teach you that word in college, or were they too busy filling you full of that liberal bullshit? Next time, he may break something more valuable than a few storm windows. A few times after that, he may break your heart. Wanton destruction—”

“*Get out!*” she screamed.

I began to cry again, and shrank away from them both. For a moment I stood between, tottering, and then my mother gathered me up. It’s all right, honey, she was saying, but I was watching my father, who had turned and was stomping away like a surly little boy. It wasn’t until then, until I had seen with what practiced and dreadful ease he had been banished, that I began to dare to hate him back.

While my mother and I were having cocoa in her sewing room, I told her how Dad had thrown me on the ground. I told her Dad had lied.

It made me feel quite wonderful and strong.

Chapter 17

"What happened then?" Susan Brooks asked breathlessly.

"Not much," I said. "It blew over." Now that it was out, I found myself mildly surprised that it had stuck in my throat so long. I once knew a kid, Herk Orville, who ate a mouse. I dared him, and he swallowed it. Raw. It was just a small fieldmouse, and it didn't look hurt at all when we found it; maybe it had just died of old age. Anyway, Herk's mom was out hanging clothes, and she just happened to look over at us, sitting in the dirt by the back step. She looked just in time to see the mouse going down Herk's throat, headfirst.

She screamed—what a fright it can give you when a grown-up screams!—and ran over and put her finger down Herk's throat. Herk threw up the mouse, the hamburger he'd eaten for lunch, and some pasty glop that looked like tomato soup. He was just starting to ask his mother what was going on when *she* threw up. And there, in all that puke, that old dead mouse didn't look bad at all. It sure looked better than the rest of the stuff. The moral seemed to be that puking up your past when the present is even worse makes some of the vomitus look nearly tasty. I started to tell them that, and then decided it would only revolt them—like the story of the Cherokee Nose Job.

"Dad was in the doghouse for a few days. That was all. No divorce. No big thing."

Carol Granger started to say something, and that was when Ted stood up. His face was pale as cheese except for two burning patches of red, one above each cheekbone. He was grinning. Did I tell you he wore his hair in a

duck's ass cut? Grease, out of style, not cool. But Ted got away with it. In that click of a second when he stood up, he looked like the ghost of James Dean come to get me, and my heart quailed.

"I'm going to take that gun away from you now, tin shit," he said, grinning. His teeth were white and even.

I had to fight hard to keep my voice steady, but I think I did pretty well. "Sit down, Ted."

Ted didn't move forward, but I could see how badly he wanted to. "That makes me sick, you know it? Trying to blame something like this on your *folks*."

"Did I say I was trying to—?"

"Shut up!" he said in a rising, strident voice. "You killed two people!"

"How really observant of you to notice," I said.

He made a horrible rippling movement with his hands, holding them at waist level, and I knew that in his mind he had just grabbed me and eaten me.

"Put that down, Charlie," he said, grinning. "Just put that gun down and fight me fair."

"Why did you quit the football team, Ted?" I asked amiably. It was very hard to sound amiable, but it worked. He looked stunned, suddenly unsure, as if no one but the stolidly predictable coach had ever dared ask him that. He looked as if he had suddenly become aware of the fact that he was the only one standing. It was akin to the look a fellow gets when he realizes his zipper is down, and is trying to think of a nice unobtrusive way to get it back up—so it will look like an act of God.

"Never mind that," he said. "Put down that gun." It sounded melodramatic as hell. Phony. He knew it.

"Afraid for your balls? Your ever-loving sack? Was that it?"

Irma Bates gasped. Sylvia, however, was watching with a certain predatory interest.

"You…" He sat down suddenly in his seat, and somebody chuckled in the back of the room. I've always wondered exactly who that was. Dick Keene? Harmon Jackson?

But I saw their faces. And what I saw surprised me. You might even say it shocked me. Because there was pleasure there. There had been a showdown, a verbal shootout, you might say, and I had won. But why did

that make them happy? Like those maddening pictures you sometimes see in the Sunday paper—"Why are these people laughing? Turn to page 41." Only, there was no page for me to turn to.

And it's important to know, you know. I've thought and thought, racked whatever brains I have left, and I don't know. Maybe it was only Ted himself, handsome and brave, full of the same natural *machismo* that keeps the wars well-attended. Simple jealousy, then. The need to see everyone at the same level, gargling in the same rat-race choir, to paraphrase Dylan. *Take off your mask, Ted, and sit down with the rest of us regular guys.*

Ted was still staring at me, and I knew well enough that he was unbroken. Only, next time he might not be so direct. Maybe next time he would try me on the flank.

Maybe it's just mob spirit. Jump on the individual.

But I didn't believe that then, and I don't believe it now, although it would explain much. No, the subtle shift from Ted's end of the seesaw to mine could not be dismissed as some mass grunt of emotion. A mob always wipes out the strange one, the sport, the mutant. That was *me,* not Ted. Ted was the exact opposite of those things. He was a boy you would have been proud to have down in the rumpus room with your daughter. No, it was in *Ted,* not in them. It had to be in Ted. I began to feel strange tentacles *of* excitement in my belly—the way a butterfly collector must feel when he thinks he has just seen a new species fluttering in yon bushes.

"I know why Ted quit football," a voice said slyly. I looked around. It was Pig Pen. Ted had fairly jumped at the sound *of* his voice. He was beginning to look a wee bit haggard.

"Do tell," I said.

"If you open your mouth, I'll kill you," Ted said deliberately. He turned his grin on Pig Pen.

Pig Pen blinked in a terrified way and licked his lips. He was torn. It was probably the first time in his life that he'd had the ax, and now he didn't know if he dared to grind it. Of course, almost anyone in the room could have told you how he came by any information he had; Mrs. Dano spent her life attending bazaars, rummage sales, church and school suppers, and Mrs. Dano had the longest, shrewdest nose in Gates Falls. I also suspected she held the record for party-line listening in. She could latch on to anyone's

dirty laundry before you could say have-you-heard-the-latest-about-Sam-Delacorte.

"I…" Pig Pen began, and turned away from Ted as he made an impotent clutching gesture with his hands.

"Go on and tell," Sylvia Ragan said suddenly. "Don't let Golden Boy scare you, hon."

Pig Pen gave her a quivering smile and then blurted out: "Mrs. Jones is an alcoholic. She had to go someplace and dry out. Ted had to help with his family."

Silence for a second.

"I'm going to kill you, Pig Pen," Ted said, getting up. His face was dead pale.

"Now, that's not nice," I said. "You said so yourself. Sit down."

Ted glared at me, and for a moment I thought he was going to break and charge at me. If he had, I would have killed him. Maybe he could see it on my face. He sat back down.

"So," I said. "The skeleton has boogied right out of the closet. Where's she drying out, Ted?"

"Shut up," he said thickly. Some of his hair had fallen across his forehead. It looked greasy. It was the first time it had ever looked that way to me.

"Oh, she's back now," Pig Pen said, and offered Ted a forgiving smile.

"You said you'd kill Pig Pen," I said thoughtfully.

"I will kill him," Ted muttered. His eyes were red and baleful.

"Then you can blame it on your parents," I said, smiling. "Won't that be a relief?"

Ted was gripping the edge of his desk tightly. Things weren't going to his liking at all. Harmon Jackson was smiling nastily. Maybe he had an old grudge against Ted.

"Your father drive her to it?" I asked kindly. "How'd it happen? Home late all the time? Supper burned and all that? Nipping on the cooking sherry a little at first? Hi-ho."

"I'll kill you." he moaned.

I was needling him—needling the shit out of him—and no one was telling me to stop. It was incredible. They were all watching Ted with a

glassy kind of interest, as if they had expected all along that there were a few maggots under there.

"Must be tough, being married to a big-time bank officer," I said. "Look at it that way. She probably didn't realize she was belting down the hard stuff so heavy. It can creep up on you, look at it that way. It can get on top of you. And it's not your fault, is it? Hi-ho."

"*Shut up!*" he screamed at me.

"There it was, right under your nose, but it just got out of control, am I right? Kind of disgusting, wasn't it? Did she really go to pot, Ted? Tell us. Get rid of it. Kind of just slopping around the house, was she?"

"*Shut up! Shut up!*"

"Drunk in front of *Dialing for Dollars?* Seeing bugs in the corners? Or was she quiet about it? Did she see bugs? Did she? Did she *go* bugs?"

"*Yeah, it was disgusting!*" He brayed at me suddenly, through a mouthful of spit. "Almost as disgusting as you! Killer! Killer!"

"Did you write her?" I asked softly.

"Why would I write her?" he asked wildly. "Why should I write her? She copped out."

"And you couldn't play football."

Ted Jones said clearly, "Drunk *bitch*."

Carol Granger gasped, and the spell was broken. Ted's eyes seemed to clear a little. The red light went out of them, and he realized what he had said.

"I'll get you for this, Charlie," he said quietly.

"You might. You might get your chance." I smiled. "A drunken old bitch of a mother. That surely is disgusting, Ted."

Ted sat silently, stating at me.

It was over, then. We could turn our attention to other things—at least, for the moment. I had a feeling we might be getting back to Ted. Or that he would get back to me.

People moved around restlessly outside.

The clock buzzed.

No one said anything for a long time, or what seemed like a long time. There was a lot to think about now.

Chapter 18

Sylvia Ragan finally broke the silence. She threw back her head and laughed long, hard, and loud. Several people, including me, jumped. Ted Jones didn't. He was still on his own trip. "You know what I'd like to do after this is over?" she asked.

"What?" Pig Pen asked. He looked surprised that he had spoken up again. Sandra Cross was looking at me gravely. She had her ankles crossed the way pretty girls do when they want to foil boys who want to look up their dresses.

"I'd like to get this in a detective magazine. 'Sixty Minutes of Terror with the Placerville Maniac.' I'd get somebody who writes good to do it. Joe McKennedy or Phil Franks…or maybe you, Charlie. How's that bite your banana?" She guffawed, and Pig Pen joined in tentatively. I think he was fascinated by Sylvia's fearlessness. Or maybe it was only her blatant sexuality. She sure didn't have her ankles crossed.

Out on the lawn, two more trooper cars had arrived. The firemen were leaving; the fire alarm had cut out a few minutes ago. Abruptly Mr. Grace disengaged himself from the crowd and started toward the main doors. A light breeze flapped the bottom of his sport coat.

"More company," Corky Herald said.

I got up, went over to the intercom, and switched it back onto TALK-LISTEN. Then I sat down again, sweating a little. Mr. Don-God-Give-Us-Grace was on his way. And he was no lightweight.

A few seconds later there was that hollow *chink!* that means the line is open. Mr. Grace said, "Charlie?" His voice was very calm, very rich, very

certain.

"How are you, skinner?" I asked.

"Fine, thanks, Charlie. How are you?"

"Keeping my thumb on it," I said agreeably.

Snickers from some of the boys.

"Charlie, we've talked about getting help for you before this. Now, you've committed a pretty antisocial act, wouldn't you agree?"

"By whose standards?"

"Society's standards, Charlie. First Mr. Carlson, now this. Will you let us help you?"

I almost asked him if my co-students weren't a part of society, because no one down here seemed too worked up about Mrs. Underwood. But I couldn't do that. It would have transgressed a set of rules that I was just beginning to grasp.

"How does Ah do it?" I bawled. "Ah already tole dat dere Mr. Denber how sorry Ah is for hittin' dat l'il girl wit dat Loosyville Sluggah. Ali wants mah poor paid shrunk! Ali wants mah soul saved an' made white as snow! How does Ah do it, Rev'rund?"

Pat Fitzgerald, who was nearly as black as the ace of spades, laughed and shook his head.

"Charlie, Charlie," Mr. Grace said, as if very sad. "Only you can save your soul now."

I didn't like that. I stopped shouting and put my hand on the pistol, as if for courage. I didn't like it at all. He had a way of slipping it to you. I'd seen him a lot since I bopped Mr. Carlson with the pipe wrench. He could really slip it in.

"Mr. Grace?"

"What, Charlie?"

"Did Tom tell the police what I said?"

"Don't you mean 'Mr. Denver'?"

"Whatever. Did he…?"

"Yes, he relayed your message."

"Have they figured out how they're going to handle me yet?"

"I don't know, Charlie. I'm more interested in knowing if you've figured out how you're going to handle yourself."

Oh, he was slipping it to me, all right. Just like he kept slipping it to me after Mr. Carlson. But then I had to go see him. Now I could turn him off anytime I wanted to. Except I couldn't, and he knew I couldn't. It was too normal to be consistent. And I was being watched by my peerless peers. They were evaluating me.

"Sweating a little?" I asked the intercom.

"Are you?"

"You guys," I said, an edge of bitterness creeping into my voice. "You're all the same."

"We are? If so, then we all want to help you."

He was going to be a much tougher nut to strip than old Tom Denver had been. That was obvious. I called Don Grace up in my mind. Short, dapper little fuck. Bald on top, big muttonchop sideburns, as if to make up for it. He favored tweed coats with suede patches on the elbows. A pipe always stuffed with something that came from Copenhagen and smelled like cowshit. A man with a headful of sharp, prying instruments. A mind-fucker, a head-stud. That's what a shrink is for, my friends and neighbors; their job is to fuck the mentally disturbed and make them pregnant with sanity. It's a bull's job, and they go to school to learn how, and all their courses are variations on a theme: *Slipping It to the Psychos for Fun and Profit*. Mostly Profit. And if you find yourself someday lying on that great analyst's couch where so many have lain before you, I'd ask you to remember one thing: When you get sanity by stud, the child always looks like the father. And they have a very high suicide rate.

But they get you lonely, and ready to cry, they get you ready to toss it all over if they will just promise to go away for a while. What do we have? What do we really have? Minds like terrified fat men, begging the eyes that look up in the bus terminal or the restaurant and threaten to meet ours to look back down, uninterested. We lie awake and picture ourselves in white hats of varying shapes. There's no maidenhead too tough to withstand the seasoned dork of modern psychiatry. But maybe that was okay. Maybe now they would play my game, all these shysters and whores.

"Let us help you, Charlie," Mr. Grace was saying.

"But by letting you help me, I would be helping you." I said it as if the idea had just occurred to me. "Don't want to do that."

"Why, Charlie?"

“Mr. Grace?”

“Yes, Charlie?”

“The next time you ask me a question, I’m going to kill somebody down here.” I could hear Mr. Grace suck wind, as if someone had just told him his son had been in a car crash. It was a very un-self-confident sound. It made me feel very good.

Everyone in the room was looking at me tightly. Ted Jones raised his head slowly, as if he had just awakened. I could see the familiar, hating darkness cloud his eyes. Anne Lasky’s eyes were round and frightened. Sylvia Ragan’s fingers were doing a slow and dreamy ballet as they rummaged in her purse for another cigarette. And Sandra Cross was looking at me gravely, gravely, as if I were a doctor, or a priest.

Mr. Grace began to speak.

“Watch it!” I said sharply. “Before you say anything, be careful. You aren’t playing your game any longer. Understand that. You’re playing mine. Statements only. Be very careful. Can you be very careful?”

He didn’t say anything about my game metaphor at all. That was when I began to believe I had him.

“Charlie…“Was that almost a plea?

“Very good. Do you think you’ll be able to keep your job after this, Mr. Grace?”

“Charlie, for God’s sake…”

“Ever so much better.”

“Let them go, Charlie. Save yourself. Please.”

“You’re talking too fast. Pretty soon a question will pop out, and that’ll be the end for somebody.”

“Charlie…”

“How was your military obligation fulfilled?”

“Wh…” Sudden whistling of breath as he cut that off.

“You almost killed somebody,” I said. “Careful, Don. I can call you Don, can’t I? Sure. Weigh those words, Don.”

I was reaching out for him.

I was going to break him.

In that second it seemed as if maybe I could break them all.

“I think I better sign off for the moment, Charlie.”

“If you go before I say you can, I’ll shoot somebody. What you’re going to do is sit there and answer my questions.”

The first sweaty desperation, as well concealed as underarm perspiration at the junior prom: “I really mustn’t, Charlie. I can’t take the responsibility for—”

“*Responsibility?*” I screamed. “My God, you’ve been taking the responsibility ever since they let you loose from college! Now you want to cop out the first time your bare ass is showing! But I’m in the driver’s seat, and by God you’ll pull the cart! Or I’ll do just what I said. Do you dig it? Do you *understand me?*”

“I won’t play a cheap parlor game with human lives for party favors, Charlie.”

“Congratulations to you,” I said. “You just described modern psychiatry. That ought to be the textbook definition, Don. Now, let me tell you: you’ll take a piss out the window if I tell you to. And God help you if I catch you in a lie. That will get somebody killed too. Ready to bare your soul, Don? Are you on your mark?”

He drew in his breath raggedly. He wanted to ask if I really meant it, but he was afraid I might answer with the gun instead of my mouth. He wanted to reach out quick and shut off the intercom, but he knew he would hear the echo of the shot in the empty building, rolling around in the corridor below him like a bowling ball up a long alley from hell.

“All right,” I said. I unbuttoned my shirt cuffs. Out on the lawn, the cops and Tom Denver and Mr. Johnson were standing around restlessly, waiting for the return of their tweedy bull stud. Read my dreams, Sigmund. Squirt ‘em with the sperm of symbols and make ‘em grow. Show me how we’re different from, say, rabid dogs or old tigers full of bad blood. Show me the man hiding between my wet dreams. They had every reason to be confident (although they did not look confident). In the symbolic sense, Mr. Grace was Pathfinder of the Western World. Bull stud with a compass.

Natty Bumppo was breathing raggedly from the little latticed box over my head. I wondered if he’d read any good rapid eye movements lately. I wondered what his own would be like when night finally came.

“All right, Don. Let’s get it on.”

Chapter 19

"How was your military obligation fulfilled?"

"In the Army, Charlie. This isn't going to accomplish anything."

"In what capacity?"

"As a doctor."

"Psychiatrist?"

"No."

"How long have you been a practicing psychiatrist?"

"Five years."

"Have you ever eaten your wife out?"

"Wh…" Terrified, angry pause.

"I…I don't know the meaning of the phrase."

"I'll rephrase it, then. Have you ever engaged in oral-genital practices with your wife?"

"I won't answer that. You have no right."

"I have all the rights. You have none. Answer, or I'll shoot someone. And remember, if you lie and I catch you in a lie, I'll shoot someone. Have you ever engaged in—?"

"No!"

"How long have you been a practicing psychiatrist?"

"Five years."

"Why?"

"Wh…Well, because it fulfills me. As a person."

"Has your wife ever had an affair with another man?"

"No."

"Another woman?"
"How do you know?"
"She loves me."
"Has your wife ever given you a blow job, Don?"
"I don't know what you—"
"You know goddamn well what I mean!"
"No, Charlie, I—"
"Ever cheat on an exam in college?"
Pause. "Absolutely not."
"On a quiz?"
"No."
I pounced. "Then how can you say your wife has never engaged in oral-genital sex practices with you?"
"I…I never…Charlie…"
"Where did you do your basic training?"
"F-Fort Benning."
"What year?"
"I don't remem—"
"*Give me a year or I'm going to shoot somebody down here!*"
"Nineteen-fifty-six."
"Were you a grunt?"
"I…I don't—"
"Were you a grunt? Were you a dogface?"
"I was…I was an officer. First lieu—"
"*I didn't ask you for that!*" I screamed.
"Charlie…Charlie, for God's sake, calm down—"
"What year was your military obligation fulfilled?"
"N-Nineteen-sixty."
"You owe your country six years! You're lying! I'm going to shoot—"
"No!" He cried. "National Guard! I was in the Guard!"
"What was your mother's maiden name?"
"G-G-Gavin."
"Why?"
"Wh…I don't know what you m—"
"Why was her maiden name Gavin?"
"Because her father's name was Gavin. Charlie—"

"In what year did you do your basic training?"

"Nineteen-fifty-sev—*six*!"

"You're lying. Caught you, didn't I, Don?"

"No! I—I—"

"You started to say fifty-*seven*."

"I was mixed up."

"I'm going to shoot somebody. In the guts, I think. Yes."

"*Charlie, for Jesus' sake!*"

"Don't let it happen again. You were a grunt, right? In the Army?"

"Yes—no—I was an officer…"

"What was your father's middle name?"

"J-John. Chuh-Charlie, get hold of yourself. D-D-Don't—"

"Ever gobbled your wife, my man?"

"No!"

"You're lying. You said you didn't know what that meant."

"You explained it to me!" He was breathing in fast little grunts. "Let me go, Charlie, let me g—"

"What is your religious denomination?"

"Methodist."

"In the choir?"

"No."

"Did you go to Sunday school?"

"Yes."

"What are the first three words in the Bible?"

Pause. "In the beginning."

"First line of the Twenty-third Psalm?"

"The…um…The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

"And you first ate your wife in 1956?"

"Yes—no…Charlie, let me alone…"

"Basic training, what year?"

"Nineteen-fifty-six!"

"You said fifty-seven before!" I screamed. "Here it goes! I'm going to blow someone's head off right now!"

"*I said fifty-six, you bastard!*" Screaming, out of breath, hysterical.

"What happened to Jonah, Don?"

"He was swallowed by a whale."

“The Bible says big fish, Don. Is that what you meant?”

“Yeah. Big fish. ‘Course it was.” Pitifully eager.

“Who built the ark?”

“Noah.”

“Where did you do your basic?”

“Fort Benning.”

More confident; familiar ground. He was letting himself be lulled. “Ever eaten your wife?”

“No.”

“What?”

“No!”

“What’s the last book in the Bible, Don?”

“Revelations.”

“Actually it’s just Revelation. No s. Right?”

“Right, sure, right.”

“Who wrote it?”

“John.”

“What was your father’s middle name?”

“John.”

“Ever get a revelation from your father, Don?”

A strange, high, cackling laugh from Don Grace. Some of the kids blinked uneasily at the sound of that laugh. “Uh…no…Charlie…I can’t say that I ever did.”

“What was your mother’s maiden name?”

“Gavin.”

“Is Christ numbered among the martyrs?”

“Ye-ess…” He was too Methodist to really be sure.

“How was he martyred?”

“By the cross. Crucified.”

“What did Christ ask God on the cross?”

“‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’”

“Don?”

“Yes, Charlie.”

“What did you just say?”

“I said ‘My God, my God, why…’” Pause. “Oh, no, Charlie. That’s not fair!”

"You asked a question."

"*You tricked me!*"

"You just killed someone, Don. Sorry."

"No!"

I fired the pistol into the floor. The whole class, which had been listening with taut, hypnotic attention, flinched. Several people screamed. Pig Pen fainted again, and he struck the floor with a satisfying meat thump. I don't know if the intercom picked it up, but it really didn't matter.

Mr. Grace was crying. Sobbing like a baby.

"Satisfactory," I said to no one in particular. "Very satisfactory."

Things seemed to be progressing nicely.

I let him sob for the best part of a minute; the cops had started toward the school at the sound of the shot, but Tom Denver, still betting on his shrink, held them back, and so *that* was all right. Mr. Grace sounded like a very small child, helpless, hopeless. I had made him fuck himself with his own big tool, like one of those weird experiences you read about in the *Penthouse Forum.* I had taken off his witch doctor's mask and made him human. But I didn't hold it against him. To err is only human, but it's divine to forgive. I believe that sincerely.

"Mr. Grace?" I said finally.

"I'm going outside now," he said. And then, with tearful rebelliousness: "And you can't stop me!"

"That's all right," I said tenderly. "The game's over, Mr. Grace. We weren't playing for keepsies this time. No one is dead down here. I shot into the floor."

Breathing silence. Then, tiredly: "How can I believe you, Charlie?"

Because there would have been a stampede.

Instead of saying that, I pointed. "Ted?"

"This is Ted Jones, Mr. Grace," Ted said mechanically.

"Y-Yes, Ted."

"He shot into the floor," Ted said in a robot voice. "Everyone is all right." Then he grinned and began to speak again. I pointed the pistol at him, and he shut his mouth with a snap.

"Thank you, Ted. Thank you, my boy." Mr. Grace began to sob again. After what seemed like a long, long time, he shut the intercom off. A long time after that, he came into view on the lawn again, walking toward the

enclave of cops on the lawn, walking in his tweed coat with the suede elbow patches, bald head gleaming, cheeks gleaming. He was walking slowly, like an old man. It was amazing how much I liked seeing him walk like that.

Chapter 20

"Oh, man," Richard Keene said from the back of the room, and his voice sounded tired and sighing, almost exhausted.

That was when a small, savagely happy voice broke in: "I thought it was great!" I craned my neck around. It was a tiny Dutch doll of a girl named Grace Stanner. She was pretty in a way that attracted the shop-course boys, who still slicked their hair back and wore white socks. They hung around her in the hall like droning bees. She wore tight sweaters and short skirts. When she walked, everything jiggled—as Chuck Berry has said in his wisdom, it's such a sight to see somebody steal the show. Her mom was no prize, from what I understood. She was sort of a pro-am barfly and spent most of her time hanging around at Denny's on South Main, about a half-mile up from what they call the corner here in Placerville. Denny's will never be mistaken for Caesar's Palace. And there are always a lot of small minds in small towns, eager to think like mother, like daughter. Now she was wearing a pink cardigan sweater and a dark green skirt, thigh-high. Her face was alight, elvish. She had raised one clenched fist unconsciously shoulder-high. And there was something crystal and poignant about the moment. I actually felt my throat tighten.

"Go, Charlie! Fuck 'em all!"

A lot of heads snapped around and a lot of mouths dropped open, but I wasn't too surprised. I told you about the roulette ball, didn't I? Sure I did. In some ways—in a lot of ways—it was still in spin. Craziness is only a matter of degree, and there are lots of people besides me who have the urge to roll heads. They go to the stockcar races and the horror movies and the

wrestling matches they have in the Portland Expo. Maybe what she said smacked of all those things, but I admired her for saying it out loud, all the same—the price of honesty is always high. She had an admirable grasp of the fundamentals. Besides, she was tiny and pretty.

Irma Bates wheeled on her, face stretched with outrage. It suddenly struck me that what was happening to Irma must be nearly cataclysmic. "Dirty-mouth!"

"Fuck you, too!" Grace shot back at her, smiling. Then, as an afterthought: "Bag!"

Irma's mouth dropped open. She struggled for words; I could see her throat working as she tried them, rejected them, tried more, looking for the words of power that would line Grace's face, drop her breasts four inches toward her belly, pop up varicose veins on those smooth thighs, and turn her hair gray. Surely those words were there someplace, and it was only a matter of finding them. So she struggled, and with her low-slung chin and bulging forehead (both generously sprinkled with blackheads), she looked like a frog.

She finally sprayed out: "They ought to shoot you, just like they'll shoot him, you slut!" She worked for more; it wasn't enough. It couldn't yet express all the horror and outrage she felt for this violent rip in the seam of her universe. "Kill all sluts. Sluts and sluts' daughters!"

The room had been quiet, but now it became absolutely silent. A pool of silence. A mental spotlight had been switched on Irma and Grace. They might have been alone in a pool of light on a huge stage. Up to this last, Grace had been smiling slightly. Now the smile was wiped off.

"What?" Grace asked slowly. "What? What?"

"Baggage! Tramp!"

Grace stood up, as if about to recite poetry. "My mother-works-in-a-laundry-you-fat-bitch-and-you-better-take-back-what-you-just-said!"

Irma's eyes rolled in caged and desperate triumph. Her neck was slick and shiny with sweat: the anxious sweat of the adolescent damned, the ones who sit home Friday nights and watch old movies on TV and also the clock. The ones for whom the phone is always mute and the voice of the mother is the voice of Thor. The ones who peck endlessly at the mustache shadow between nose and upper lip. The ones who go to see Robert Redford with their girlfriends and then come back alone on another day to see him again,

with their palms clutched damply in their laps. The ones who agonize over long, seldom-mailed letters to John Travolta, written by the close, anxious light of Tensor study lamps. The ones for whom time has become a slow and dreamy sledge of doom, bringing only empty rooms and the smell of old sweats. Sure, that neck was slimy with sweat. I wouldn't kid you, any more than I would myself.

She opened her mouth and brayed: "WHORE'S DAUGHTER!"

"Okay," Grace said. She had started up the aisle toward Irma, holding her hands out in front of her like a stage hypnotist's. She had very long fingernails, lacquered the color of pearl. "I'm going to claw your eyes out, cunt."

"Whore's daughter, whore's daughter!" She was almost *singing* it.

Grace smiled. Her eyes were still alight and elvish. She wasn't hurrying up that aisle, but she wasn't lagging, either. No. She was coming right along. She was pretty, as I had never noticed before, pretty and precious. It was as if she had become a secret cameo of herself.

"Okay, Irma," she said. "Here I come. Here I come for your eyes."

Irma suddenly aware, shrank back in her seat.

"Stop," I said to Grace. I didn't pick up the pistol, but I laid my hand on it.

Grace stopped and looked at me inquiringly. Irma looked relieved and also vindicated, as if I had taken on aspects of a justly intervening god. "Whore's daughter," she confided to the class in general. "Missus Stanner has open house every night, just as soon as she gets back from the beer-joint. With *her* as practicing apprentice." She smiled sickly at Grace, a smile that was supposed to convey a superficial, cutting sympathy, and instead only inscribed her own pitiful empty terror. Grace was still looking at me inquiringly.

"Irma?" I asked politely. "Can I have your attention, Irma?"

And when she looked at me, I saw fully what was happening. Her eyes had a glittery yet opaque sheen. Her face was flushed of cheek but waxy of brow. She looked like something you might send your kid out wearing for Halloween. She was blowing up. The whole thing had offended whatever shrieking albino bat it was that passed for her soul. She was ready to go straight up to heaven or dive-bomb down into hell.

“Good,” I said when both of them were looking at me. “Now. We have to keep order here. I’m sure you understand that. Without order, what do you have? The jungle. And the best way to keep order is to settle our difficulties in a civilized way.”

“Hear, hear!” Harmon Jackson said.

I got up, went to the blackboard, and took a piece of chalk from the ledge. Then I drew a large circle on the tiled floor, perhaps five feet through the middle. I kept a close eye on Ted Jones while I did it, too. Then I went back to the desk and sat down.

I gestured to the circle. “Please, girls.”

Grace came forward quickly, precious and perfect. Her complexion was smooth and fair.

Irma sat stony.

“Irma,” I said. “Now, Irma. You’ve made accusations, you know.”

Irma looked faintly surprised, as if the idea of accusations had exploded an entirely new train of thought in her mind. She nodded and rose from her seat with one hand cupped demurely over her mouth, as if to stifle a tiny, coquettish giggle. She stepped mincingly up the aisle and into the circle, standing as far away from Grace as was possible, eyes cast demurely down, hands linked together at her waist. She looked ready to sing “Granada” on *The Gong Show.*

I thought randomly: Her father sells cars, doesn’t he?

“Very good,” I said. “Now, as has been hinted at in church, in school, and even on *Howdy Doody,* a single step outside the circle means death. Understood?”

They understood that. They all understood it. This is not the same as comprehension, but it was good enough. When you stop to think, the whole idea of comprehension has a faintly archaic taste, like the sound of forgotten tongues or a look into a Victorian *camera obscura.* We Americans are much higher on simple understanding. It makes it easier to read the billboards when you’re heading into town on the expressway at plus-fifty. To comprehend, the mental jaws have to gape wide enough to make the tendons creak. Understanding, however, can be purchased on every paperback-book rack in America.

“Now,” I said. “I would like a minimum of physical violence here. We already have enough of that to think about. I think your mouths and your

open hands will be sufficient, girls. I will be the judge. Accepted?"

They nodded.

I reached into my back pocket and brought out my red bandanna. I had bought it at the Ben Franklin five-and-dime downtown, and a couple of times I had worn it to school knotted around my neck, very continental, but I had gotten tired of the effect and put it to work as a snot rag. Bourgeois to the core, that's me.

"When I drop it, you go at it. First lick to you, Grace, as you seem to be the defendant."

Grace nodded brightly. There were roses in her cheeks. That's what my mother always says about someone who has high color.

Irma Bates just looked demurely at my red bandanna.

"Stop it!" Ted Jones snapped. "You said you weren't going to hurt anyone, Charlie. Now, stop it!" His eyes looked desperate. "Just stop it!"

For no reason I could fathom, Don Lordi laughed crazily.

"She started it, Ted Jones," Sylvia Ragan said heatedly. "If some Ethiopian jug-diddler called my mother a whore—"

"Whore, dirty whore," Irma agreed demurely.

"…I'd claw her fuggin' eyes out!"

"You're crazy!" Ted bellowed at her, his face the color of old brick. "We could stop him! If we all got together, we could—"

"Shut up, Ted," Dick Keene said. "Okay?"

Ted looked around, saw he had neither support nor sympathy, and shut up. His eyes were dark and full of crazy hate. I was glad it was a good long run between his desk and Mrs. Underwood's. I could shoot him in the foot if I had to.

"Ready, girls?"

Grace Stanner grinned a healthy, gutsy grin. "All ready."

Irma nodded. She was a big girl, standing with her legs apart and her head slightly lowered. Her hair was a dirty blond color, done in round curls that looked like toilet-paper rolls.

I dropped my bandanna. It was on.

Grace stood thinking about it. I could almost see her realizing how deep it could be, wondering maybe how far in over her head she wanted to get. In that instant I loved her. No…I loved them both.

“You’re a fat, bigmouth bitch,” Grace said, looking Irma in the eye. “You stink. I mean that. Your body *stinks*. You’re a louse.”

“Good,” I said, when she was done. “Give her a smack.”

Grace hauled off and slapped the side of Irma’s face. It made a flat whapping noise, like one board striking another. Her sweater pulled up above the waistband of her skirt with the swing of her arm.

Corky Herald went “Unhh!” under his breath.

Irma let out a whoofing grunt. Her head snapped back, her face screwed up. She didn’t look demure anymore. There was a large, hectic patch on her left cheek.

Grace threw back her head, drew a sudden knife-breath, and stood ready. Her hair spilled over her shoulders, beautiful and perfect. She waited.

“Irma for the prosecution,” I said. “Go ahead, Irma.”

Irma was breathing heavily. Her eyes were glazed and offended, her mouth horrified. At that moment she looked like no one’s sweet child of morning.

“Whore,” she said finally, apparently deciding to stick with a winner. Her lip lifted, fell, and lifted again, like a dog’s. “Dirty boy-fucking whore.”

I nodded to her.

Irma grinned. She was very big. Her arm, coming around, was like a wall. It rocketed against the side of Grace’s face. The sound was a sharp crack.

“Ow!” someone whined.

Grace didn’t fall over. The whole side of her face went red, but she didn’t fall over. Instead, she smiled at Irma. And Irma flinched. I saw it and could hardly believe it: Dracula had feet of clay, after all.

I snatched a quick look at the audience. They were hung, hypnotized. They weren’t thinking about Mr. Grace or Tom Denver or Charles Everett Decker. They were watching, and maybe what they saw was a little bit of their own souls, flashed at them in a cracked mirror. It was fine. It was like new grass in spring.

“Rebuttal, Grace?” I asked.

Grace’s lips drew back from her tiny ivory teeth. “You never had a date, that’s what’s the matter with you. You’re ugly. You smell bad. And so all you think about is what other people do, and you have to make it all dirty in your mind. You’re a bug.”

I nodded to her.

Grace swung, and Irma shied away. The blow struck her only glancingly, but she began to weep with a sudden, slow hopelessness. "Let me out," she groaned. "I don't want to any more, Charlie. Let me *out!*"

"Take back what you said about my mother," Grace said grimly.

"Your mother sucks cocks!" Irma screamed. Her face was twisted; her toilet-roll curls bobbed madly.

"Good," I said. "Go ahead, Irma."

But Irma was weeping hysterically. "*J-J-Je-Jesusss…*" she screamed. Her arms came up and covered her face with terrifying slowness. "God I want to be *d-d-d-dead…*"

"Say you're sorry," Grace said grimly. "Take it back."

"*You* suck cocks!" Irma screamed from behind the barricade of her arms.

"Okay," I said. "Let her have it, Irma. Last chance."

This time Irma swung from the heels. I saw Grace's eyes squeeze into slits, saw the muscles of her neck tighten into cords. But the angle of her jaw caught most of the blow and her head shifted only slightly. Still, that whole side of her face was bright red, as if from sunburn.

Irma's whole body jogged and jiggled with the force of her sobs, which seemed to come from a deep well in her that had never been tapped before.

"You haven't got nothing," Grace said. "You *ain't* nothing. Just a fat, stinky pig is what you are."

"Hey, give it to her!" Billy Sawyer yelled. He slammed both fists down heavily on his desk. "Hey, pour it on!"

"You ain't even got any *friends,*" Grace said, breathing hard. "Why do you even bother living?"

Irma let out a thin, reedy wail.

"All done," Grace said to me.

"Okay," I said. "Give it to her."

Grace drew back, and Irma screamed and went to her knees. "Don't h-h-hit me. Don't hit me no more! *Don't you hit me—*"

"Say you're sorry."

"I can't," she wept. "Don't you know *I can't?*"

"You can. You better."

There was no sound for a moment, but the vague buzz of the wall clock. Then Irma looked up, and Grace's hand came down fast, amazingly fast,

making a small, ladylike splat against Irma's cheek. It sounded like a shot from a .22.

Irma fell heavily on one hand, her curls hanging in her face. She drew in a huge, ragged breath and screamed, "Okay! All right! I'm sorry!"

Grace stepped back, her mouth half-open and moist, breathing rapidly and shallowly. She raised her hands, palms out, in a curiously dove-like gesture, and pushed her hair away from her cheeks. Irma looked up at her dumbly, unbelievingly. She struggled to her knees again, and for a moment I thought she was going to offer a prayer to Grace. Then she began to weep.

Grace looked at the class, then looked at me. Her breasts were very full, pushing at the soft fabric of her sweater.

"My mother fucks," she said, "and I love her."

The applause started somewhere in the back, maybe with Mike Gavin or Nancy Caskin. But it started and spread until they were all applauding, all but Ted Jones and Susan Brooks. Susan looked too overwhelmed to applaud. She was looking at Gracie Stanner shiningly.

Irma knelt on the floor, her face in her hands. When the applause died (I had looked at Sandra Cross; she applauded very gently, as if in a dream), I said, "Stand up, Irma."

She looked at me wonderingly, her face streaked and shadowed and ravaged, as if she had been in a dream herself.

"Leave her alone," Ted said, each word distinct.

"Shut up," Harmon Jackson said. "Charlie is doing all right."

Ted turned around in his seat and looked at him. But Harmon did not drop his eyes, as he might have done at another place, another time. They were both on the Student Council together—where Ted, of course, had always been the power.

"Stand up, Irma," I said gently.

"Are you going to shoot me?" she whispered.

"You said you were sorry."

"She made me say it."

"But I bet you are."

Irma looked at me dumbly from beneath the madhouse of her toilet-paper-roll curls. "I've always been sorry," she said. "That's what makes it s-s-s-so hard to s-say."

"Do you forgive her?" I asked Grace.

“Huh?” Grace looked at me, a little dazed. “Oh. Yeah. Sure.” She walked suddenly back to her seat and sat down, where she looked frowningly at her hands.

“Irma?” I said.

“What?” She was peering at me, doglike, truculent, fearful, pitiful.

“Do you have something you want to say?”

“I don’t know.”

She stood up a little at a time. Her hands dangled strangely, as if she didn’t know exactly what to do with them.

“I think you do.”

“You’ll feel better when it’s off your chest, Irma,” Tanis Gannon said. “I always do.”

“Leave her alone, fa Chrissake,” Dick Keene said from the back of the room.

“I don’t want to be let alone,” Irma said suddenly. “I want to say it.” She brushed back her hair defiantly. Her hands were not dove-like at all. “I’m not pretty. No one likes me. I never had a date. Everything she said is true. There.” The words rushed out very fast, and she screwed up her face while she was saying them, as if she were taking nasty medicine.

“Take a little care of yourself,” Tanis said. Then, looking embarrassed but still determined: “You know, wash, shave your legs and, uh, armpits. Look nice. I’m no raving beauty, but I don’t stay home *every* weekend. You could do it.”

“I don’t know how!”

Some of the boys were beginning to look uneasy, but the girls were leaning forward. They looked sympathetic now, all of them. They had that confessions-at-the-pajama-party look that every male seems to know and dread.

“Well…” Tanis began. Then she stopped and shook her head. “Come back here and sit down.”

Pat Fitzgerald snickered. “Trade secrets?”

“That’s right.”

“Some trade,” Corky Herald said. That got laughs. Irma Bates shuttled to the back of the room, where she, Tanis, Anne Lasky, and Susan Brooks started some sort of confabulation. Sylvia was talking softly with Grace, and Pig Pen’s eyes were crawling avidly over both of them. Ted Jones was

frowning at the air. George Yannick was carving something on the top of his desk and smoking a cigarette—he looked like any busy carpenter. Most of the other; were looking out the windows at the cops directing traffic and conferring in desperate-looking little huddles. I could pick out Don Grace, good old Tom Denver, and Jerry Kesserling, the traffic cop.

A bell went off suddenly with a loud bray, making all of us jump. It made the cops outside jump, too. A couple of them pulled their guns.

"Change-of-classes bell," Harmon said.

I looked at the wall clock. It was 9:50. At 9:05 I had been sitting in my seat by the window, watching the squirrel. Now the squirrel was gone, good old Tom Denver was gone, and Mrs. Underwood was really gone. I thought it over and decided I was gone, too.

Chapter 21

Three more state-police cars came, and also a number of citizens from town. The cops tried to shoo them away, with greater or lesser degrees of success. Mr. Frankel, owner and proprietor of Frankel's Jewelry Store & Camera Shop, drove up in his new Pontiac Firebird and jawed for quite a while with Jerry Kesserling. He pushed his horn-rimmed glasses up on his nose constantly as he talked. Jerry was trying to get rid of him, but Mr. Frankel wasn't having any of it. He was also Placerville's second selectman and a crony of Norman Jones, Ted's father.

"My mother got me a ring in his store," Sarah Pasterne said, looking at Ted from the corner of her eye. "It greened my finger the first day."

"My mother says he's a gyp," Tanis said.

"Hey!" Pig Pen gulped. "There's my mother!"

We all looked. Sure enough, there was Mrs. Dano talking with one of the state troopers, her slip hanging a quarter of an inch below the hem of her dress. She was one of those ladies who do fifty percent of their talking with their hands. They fluttered and whipped like flags, and it made me think of autumn Saturdays on the gridiron, somehow: holding…clipping…illegal tackle. I guess in this case you'd have to say it was illegal holding.

We all knew her by sight as well as by reputation; she headed up a lot of PTA functions and was a member in good standing of the Mothers Club. Go out to a baked-bean supper to benefit the class trip, or to the Sadie Hawkins dance in the gym, or to the senior outing, and you'd be apt to find Mrs. Dano at the door, ready with the old glad hand, grinning like there was no tomorrow, and collecting bits of information the way frogs catch flies.

Pig Pen shifted nervously in his seat, as if he might have to go to the bathroom.

"Hey, Pen, your mudda's callin'," Jack Goldman intoned from the back of the room.

"Let her call," Pig Pen muttered.

The Pen had an older sister, Lilly Dano, who was a senior when we were all freshmen. She had a face that looked a lot like Pig Pen's, which made her nobody's candidate for Teen Queen. A hook-nosed junior named LaFollet St. Armand began squiring her about, and then knocked her up higher than a kite. LaFollet joined the Marines, where they presumably taught him the difference between his rifle and his gun—which was for shooting and which was for fun. Mrs. Dano appeared at no PTA functions for the next two months. Lilly was packed off to an aunt in Boxford, Massachusetts. Shortly after that, Mrs. Dano returned to the same old stand, grinning harder than ever. It's a small-town classic, friends.

"She must be really worried about you," Carol Granger said.

"Who cares?" Pig Pen asked indifferently. Sylvia Ragan smiled at him. Pig Pen blushed.

Nobody said anything for a while. We watched the townspeople mill around beyond the bright yellow crash barricades that were going up. I saw some other mums and dads among them. I didn't see Sandra's mother and father, and I didn't see big Joe McKennedy. Hey, I didn't really expect he'd show up, anyway. Circuses have never been our style.

A newsmobile from WGAN-TV pulled up. One of the guys got out, patting his process neatly into place, and jawed with a cop. The cop pointed across the road. The guy with the process went back to the newsmobile, and two more guys got out and started unloading camera equipment.

"Anybody here got a transistor radio?" I asked.

Three of them raised hands. Corky's was the biggest, a Sony twelve transistor that he carried in his briefcase. It got six bands, including TV, shortwave, and CB. He put it on his desk and turned it on. We were just in time for the ten-o'clock report:

"Topping the headlines, a Placerville High School senior, Charles Everett Decker…"

"Everett!" Somebody snickered.

"Shut up," Ted said curtly.

Pat Fitzgerald stuck out his tongue.

"…apparently went berserk early this morning and is now holding twenty-four classmates hostage in a classroom of that high school. One person, Peter Vance, thirty-seven, a history teacher at Placerville, is known dead. Another teacher, Mrs. Jean Underwood, also thirty-seven, is feared dead. Decker has commandeered the intercom system and has communicated twice with school authorities. The list of hostages is as follows…"

He read down the class list as I had given it to Tom Denver. "I'm on the radio!" Nancy Caskin exclaimed when they reached her name. She blinked and smiled tentatively. Melvin Thomas whistled. Nancy colored and told him to shut up.

"…and George Yannick. Frank Philbrick, head of the Maine State Police, has asked that all friends and family stay away from the scene. Decker is presumed dangerous, and Philbrick emphasized that nobody knows at this time what might set him off. 'We have to assume that the boy is still on a hair trigger,' Philbrick said."

"Want to pull my trigger?" I asked Sylvia.

"Is your safety on?" she asked right back, and the class roared. Anne Lasky laughed with her hands over her mouth, blushing a deep bright red. Ted Jones, our practicing party poop, scowled.

"…Grace, Placerville's psychiatrist and guidance counselor, talked to Decker over the intercom system only minutes ago. Grace told reporters that Decker threatened to kill someone in the classroom if Grace did not leave the upstairs office immediately."

"Liar!" Grace Stanner said musically. Irma jumped a little.

"Who does he think he is?" Melvin asked angrily. "Does he think he can get away with that shit?"

"…also said that he considers Decker to be a schizophrenic personality, possibly past the point of anything other than borderline rationality. Grace concluded his hurried remarks by saying: 'At this point, Charles Decker might conceivably do anything.' Police from the surrounding towns of…"

"Whatta crocka shit!" Sylvia blared. "I'm gonna tell those guys what really went down with that guy when we get outta here! I'm gonna—"

"Shut up and listen!" Dick Keene snapped at her.

"…and Lewiston have been summoned to the scene. At this moment, according to Captain Philbrick, the situation is at an impasse. Decker has sworn to kill if tear gas is used, and with the lives of twenty-four children at stake…"

"*Children,*" Pig Pen said suddenly. "Children this and children that. They stabbed you in the back, Charlie. Already. Children. Ha. Shit. What do they think is happening? I—"

"He's saying something about—" Corky began.

"Never mind. Turn it off," I said. "This sounds more interesting." I fixed the Pen with my best steely gaze. "What seems to be on yore mind, pal?"

Pig Pen jerked his thumb at Irma. "She thinks she's got it bad," he said. "Her. Heh." He laughed a sudden, erratic laugh. For no particular reason I could make out, he removed a pencil from his breast pocket and looked at it. It was a purple pencil.

"Be-Bop pencil," Pig Pen said. "Cheapest pencils on the face of the earth, that's what I think. Can't sharpen 'em at all. Lead breaks. Every September since I started first grade Ma comes home from the Mammoth Mart with two hundred Be-Bop pencils in a plastic box. And I use 'em, Jesus."

He snapped his purple pencil between his thumbs and stared at it. To tell the truth, I did think it looked like a pretty cheap pencil. I've always used the Eberhard Faber myself.

"Ma," Pig Pen said. "That's Ma for you. Two hundred Be-Bop pencils in a plastic box. You know what her big thing is? Besides all those shitty suppers where they give you a big plate of Hamburger Helper and a paper cup of orange Jell-O full of grated carrots? Huh? She enters contests. That's her hobby. Hundreds of contests. All the time. She subscribes to all the women's magazines and enters the sweepstakes. Why she likes Rinso for all her dainty things in twenty-five words or less. My sister had a kitten once, and Ma wouldn't even let her keep it."

"She the one who got pregnant?" Corky asked.

"Wouldn't even let her keep it," Pig Pen said. "Drownded it in the bathtub when no one would take it. Lilly begged her to at least take it to the vet so it could have gas, and Ma said four bucks for gas was too much to spend on a worthless kitten."

"Oh, poor thing," Susan Brooks said.

“I swear to God, she did it right in the bathtub. All those goddamn pencils. Will she buy me a new shirt? Huh? Maybe for my birthday. I say, ‘Ma, you should hear what the kids call me. Ma, for Lord’s sake.’ I don’t even get an allowance, she says she needs it for postage so she can enter her contests. A new shirt for my birthday and a shitload of Be-Bop pencils in a plastic box to take back to school. I tried to get a paper route once, and she put a stop to that. She said there were women of loose virtue who laid in wait for young boys after their husbands went to work.”

“Oh, my Gawwd!” Sylvia bellowed.

“And contests. And PTA suppers. And chaperoning dances. Grabbing on to everybody. Sucking up to them and grinning.”

He looked at me and smiled the oddest smile I had seen all day. And that was going some.

“You know what she said when Lilly had to go away? She said I’d have to sell my car. That old Dodge my uncle gave me when I got my driver’s license. I said I wouldn’t. I said Uncle Fred gave it to me and I was going to keep it. She said if I wouldn’t sell it, she would. She’d signed all the papers, and legally it was hers. She said I wasn’t going to get any girl pregnant in the back seat. Me. Get a girl pregnant in the back seat. That’s what she said.”

He brandished a broken pencil half. The lead poked out of the wood like a black bone. “Me. Hah. The last date I had was for the eighth-grade class picnic. I told Ma I wouldn’t sell the Dodge. She said I would. I ended up selling it. I knew I would. I can’t fight her. She always knows what to say. You start giving her a reason why you can’t sell your car, and she says: ‘Then how come you stay in the bathroom so long?’ Right off the wall. You’re talking about the car, and she’s talking about the bathroom. Like you’re doing something dirty in there. She grinds you.” He stared out the window. Mrs. Dano was no longer in sight. “She grinds and grinds and grinds, and she always beats you. Be-Bop pencils that break every time you try to sharpen them. That’s how she beats you. That’s how she grinds you down. And she’s so mean and stupid, she drownded the kitty, just a little kitty, and she’s so stupid that you know everybody laughs at her behind her back. So what does that make me? Littler and stupider. After a while you feel just like a little kitty that crawled into a plastic box full of Be-Bop pencils and got brought home by mistake.” The room was dead quiet. Pig

Pen had center stage. I don't think he knew it. He looked grubby and pissed off, fists clenched around his broken pencil halves. Outside, a cop had driven a police cruiser onto the lawn. He parked it parallel to the school, and a few more cops ran down behind it, presumably to do secret things. They had riot guns in their hands. "I don't think I'd mind if she snuffed it," Pig Pen said, grinning a small, horrified grin. "I wish I had your stick, Charlie. If I had your stick, I think I'd kill her myself."

"You're crazy, too," Ted said worriedly. "God, you're all going crazy right along with him."

"Don't be such a creep, Ted." It was Carol Granger. In a way, it was surprising not to find her on Ted's side. I knew he had taken her out a few times before she started with her current steady, and bright establishment types usually stick together. Still, it had been she who had dropped him. To make a very clumsy analogy, I was beginning to suspect that Ted was to my classmates what Eisenhower must always have been to the dedicated liberals of the fifties—you had to like him, that style, that grin, that record, those good intentions, but there was something exasperating and a tiny bit slimy about him. You can see I'm fixated on Ted…

Why not? I'm still trying to figure him out. Sometimes it seems that everything that happened on that long morning is just something I imagined, or some half-baked writer's fantasy. But it *did* happen. And sometimes, now, it seems to me that Ted was at the center of it all, not me. It seems that Ted goaded them all into people they were not…or into the people they really were. All I know for sure is that Carol was looking at him defiantly, not like a demure valedictorian-to-be due to speak on the problems of the black race. She looked angry and a wee bit cruel.

When I think about the Eisenhower administration, I think about the U-2 incident. When I think about that funny morning, I think about the sweat patches that were slowly spreading under the arms of Ted's khaki shirt.

"When they drag him off, they won't find anything but nut cases," Ted was saying. He looked mistrustfully at Pig Pen, who was glaring sweatily at the halves of his Be-Bop pencil as if they were the only things left in the world. His neck was grimy, but what the hell. Nobody was talking about his neck.

"They grind you down," he whispered. He threw the pencil halves on the floor. He looked at them, then looked up at me. His face was strange and

grief-stunned. It made me uncomfortable. “They’ll grind you down, too, Charlie. Wait and see if they don’t.”

There was an uncomfortable silence in the room. I was holding on to the pistol very tightly. Without thinking about it much, I took out the box of shells and put three of them in, filling the magazine again. The handgrip was sweaty. I suddenly realized I had been holding it by the barrel, pointing it at myself, not looking at them. No one had made a break. Ted was sort of hunched over his desk, hands gripping the edge, but he hadn’t moved, except in his head. I suddenly thought that touching his skin would be like touching an alligator handbag. I wondered if Carol had ever kissed him, touched him. Probably had. The thought made me want to puke.

Susan Brooks suddenly burst into tears.

Nobody looked at her. I looked at them, and they looked at me. I had been holding the pistol by the barrel. They knew it. They had seen it.

I moved my feet, and one of them kicked Mrs. Underwood. I looked down at her. She had been wearing a casual tartan coat over a brown cashmere sweater. She was beginning to stiffen. Her skin probably felt like an alligator handbag. Rigor, you know. I had left a footmark on her sweater at some point in time. For some reason, that made me think of a picture I had once seen of Ernest Hemingway, standing with one foot on a dead lion and a rifle in his hand and half a dozen grinning black bearers in the background. I suddenly needed to scream. I had taken her life, I had snuffed her, put a bullet in her head and spilled out algebra.

Susan Brooks had put her head down on her desk, the way they used to make us do in kindergarten when it was nap time. She was wearing a powder-blue scarf in her hair. It looked very pretty. My stomach hurt.

“DECKER!”

I cried out and jerked the pistol around toward the windows. It was a state trooper with a battery-powered bullhorn. Up on the hill, the newsmen were grinding away with their cameras. Just grinding away—Pig Pen hadn’t been so far wrong, at that.

“COME OUT, DECKER, WITH YOUR HANDS UP!”

“Let me be,” I said.

My hands had begun to tremble. My stomach really did hurt. I’ve always had a lousy stomach. Sometimes I’d get the dry heaves before I went to school in the morning, or when I was taking a girl out for the first time.

Once, Joe and I took a couple of girls down to Harrison State Park. It was July, warm and very beautiful. The sky had a dim, very high haze. The girl I was with was named Annmarie. She spelled it all one name. She was very pretty. She wore dark green corduroy shorts and a silk pullover blouse. She had a beach bag. We were going down Route 1 toward Bath, the radio on and playing good rock 'n' roll. Brian Wilson, I remember that, Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys. And Joe was driving his old blue Mercury—he used to call it *De Blue Frawwwg* and then grin his Joe McKennedy grin. All the vents were open. I got sick to my stomach. It was very bad. Joe was talking to his girl. They were talking about surfing, which was certainly compatible with the Beach Boys on the radio. She was a fine-looking girl. Her name was Rosalynn. She was Annmarie's sister. I opened my mouth to say I felt sick, and puked all over the floor. Some of it got on Annmarie's leg, and the look on her face, you couldn't imagine it. Or maybe you could. They all tried to make light of it, brush it off. I let all my guys puke on me on the first date, ha-ha. I couldn't go in swimming that day. My stomach felt too bad. Annmarie sat on the blanket next to me most of the time and got a burn. The girls had packed a picnic lunch. I drank a soda, but I couldn't eat any of the sandwiches. I was thinking about Joe's blue Mere, standing in the sun all day, and how it was going to smell going home. The late Lenny Bruce once said you can't get snot off a suede jacket, and to that I would add one of the other great home truths: you can't get the smell of vomit out of a blue Mercury's upholstery. It's there for weeks, for months, maybe years. And it smelled just about like I thought it would. Everybody just pretended it wasn't there. But it was.

"COME ON OUT, DECKER. WE'RE THROUGH FOOLING AROUND WITH YOU!"

"Stop it! Shut up!" Of course they couldn't hear me. They didn't want to. This was their game.

"Don't like it so well when you can't talk back, do you?" Ted Jones said. "When you can't play any of your smart games."

"Leave me alone." I sounded suspiciously like I was whining.

"They'll wearya out," Pig Pen said. It was the voice of doom. I tried to think about the squirrel, and about the way the lawn grew right up to the building, no fucking around. I couldn't do it. My mind was jackstraws in the wind. The beach that day had been bright and hot. Everybody had a

transistor radio, all of them tuned to different stations. Joe and Rosalynn had body-surfed in glass-green waves.

"YOU'VE GOT FIVE MINUTES, DECKER!"

"Go on out," Ted urged. He was gripping the edge of his desk again. "Go out while you've got a chance."

Sylvia whirled on him. "What have you got to be? Some kind of hero? Why? Why? Shit, that's all you'll be, Ted Jones. I'll tell them—"

"Don't tell me what—"

"…wearya down, Charlie, grind ya, wait and—"

"DECKER!"

"Go on out, Charlie…"

"…please, can't you see you're upsetting him—"

"DECKER!"

"…PTA suppers and all that lousy…"

"…cracking up if you'd just let him DECKER! alone grindya wearya down you go Charlie you can't DON'T WANT TO BE FORCED TO SHOOT until you're ready leave him be Ted if you know what all of you shut up good for you COMEOUT…"

I swung the pistol up at the windows, holding it in both hands, and pulled the trigger four times. The reports slammed around the room like bowling balls. Window glass blew out in great crackling fistfuls. The troopers dived down out of sight. The cameramen hit the gravel. The clot of spectators broke and ran in all directions. Broken glass shone and twinkled on the green grass outside like diamonds on show-window velvet, brighter gems than any in Mr. Frankel's store.

There was no answering fire. They were bluffing. I knew that; it was my stomach, my goddamn stomach. What else could they do but bluff?

Ted Jones was not bluffing. He was halfway to the desk before I could bring the pistol around on him. He froze, and I knew he thought I was going to shoot him. He was looking right past me into darkness.

"Sit down," I said.

He didn't move. Every muscle seemed paralyzed.

"Sit down."

He began to tremble. It seemed to begin in his legs and spread up his trunk and arms and neck. It reached his mouth, which began to gibber silently. It climbed to his right cheek, which began to twitch. His eyes

stayed steady. I have to give him that, and with admiration. One of the few things my father says when he's had a few that I agree with is that kids don't have much balls in this generation. Some of them are trying to start the revolution by bombing U.S. government washrooms, but none of them are throwing Molotov cocktails at the Pentagon. But Ted's eyes, even full of darkness, stayed steady.

"Sit down," I repeated.

He went and sat down.

Nobody in the room had cried out. Several of them had put their hands over their ears. Now they took them away carefully, sampling the noise level of the air, testing it. I looked for my stomach. It was there. I was in control again.

The man with the bullhorn was shouting, but this time he wasn't shouting at me. He was telling the people who had been watching from across the road to get out of the area and be snappy about it. They were doing it. Many of them ran hunched over, like Richard Widmark in a World War II epic.

A quiet little breeze riffled in through the two broken windows. It caught a paper on Harmon Jackson's desk and fluttered it into the aisle. He leaned over and picked it up.

Sandra Cross said, "Tell something else, Charlie."

I felt a weird smile stretch my lips. I wanted to sing the chorus from that folk song, the one about beautiful, beautiful blue eyes, but I couldn't remember the words and probably wouldn't have dared, anyway. I sing like a duck. So I only looked at her and smiled my weird smile. She blushed a little but didn't drop her eyes. I thought of her married to some slob with five two-button suits and fancy pastel toilet paper in the bathroom. It hurt me with its inevitability. They all find out sooner or later how unchic it is to pop your buttons at the Sadie Hawkins dance, or to crawl into the trunk so you can get into the drive-in for free. They stop eating pizza and plugging dimes into the juke down at Fat Sammy's. They stop kissing boys in the blueberry patch. And they always seem to end up looking like the Barbie doll cutouts in *Jack and* Jill magazine. Fold in at Slot A, Slot B, and Slot C. Watch Her Grow Old Before Your Very Eyes. For a second I thought I might actually turn on the waterworks, but I avoided that indignity by wondering if she was wearing white panties today.

It was 10:20. I said:

Chapter 22

I was twelve when Mom got me the corduroy suit. By that time Dad had pretty much given up on me and I was my mother's responsibility. I wore the suit to church on Sundays and to Bible meetings on Thursday nights. With my choice of three snap-on bow ties. Rooty-toot.

But I hadn't expected her to try and make me wear it to that goddamn birthday party. I tried everything. I reasoned with her. I threatened not to go. I even tried a lie—told her the party was off because Carol had the chickenpox. One call to Carol's mother set that straight. Nothing worked. Mom let me run pretty much as I pleased most of the time, but when she got an idea solid in her mind, you were stuck with it. Listen to this: for Christmas one year, my dad's brother gave her this weird jigsaw puzzle. I think Uncle Tom was in collusion with my dad on that one. She did a lot of jigsaws—I helped—and they both thought it was the biggest waste of time on earth. So Tom sent her a five-hundred-piece jigsaw puzzle that had a single blueberry down in the lower-right-hand corner. The rest of the puzzle was solid white, no shades. My father laughed his ass off. "Let's see you do that one, Mother," he said. He always called her "Mother" when he felt a good one had been put over on her, and it never ceased to irritate her. She sat down on Christmas afternoon and spread the puzzle out on her puzzle table in her bedroom—by this time they each had their own. There were TV dinners and pickup lunches for Dad and I on December twenty-sixth and the twenty-seventh, but on the morning of the twenty-eighth, the puzzle was done. She took a Polaroid picture of it to send to Uncle Tom, who lives in Wisconsin. Then she took the puzzle apart and put it away in the attic. That

was two years ago, and so far as I know, it's still there. But she did it. My mother is a humorous, literate, pleasant person. She is kind to animals and accordion-playing mendicants. But you didn't cross her, or she could dig in her heels…usually somewhere in the groin area.

I was crossing her. I was, in fact, starting to run through my arguments for the fourth time that day, but time had just about tun out. The bow tie was clutching my collar like a pink spider with hidden steel legs, the coat was too tight, and she'd even made me put on my square-toed shoes, which were my Sunday best. My father wasn't there, he was down at Gogan's slopping up a few with his good buddies, but if he'd been around he would have said I looked "squared away." I didn't feel like an asshole.

"Listen, Mother—"

"I don't want to hear any more about it, Charlie." I didn't want to hear any more about it either, but since I was the one running for the Shithead of the Year Award, and not her, I felt obliged to give it the old school grunt.

"All I'm trying to tell you is that nobody is going to be wearing a suit to that party, Mom. I called up Joe McKennedy this morning, and he said he was just going to wear—"

"Just shut up about it," she said, very soft, and I did. When my mother says "shut up," she's really mad. She didn't learn "shut up" reading *The Guardian*. "Shut up, or you won't be going anywhere."

But I knew what that meant. "Not going anywhere" would apply to a lot more than Carol Granger's party. It would probably mean movies, the Harlow rec center, and swimming classes for the next month. Mom is quiet, but she carries a grudge when she doesn't get her way. I remembered the jigsaw puzzle, which had borne the whimsical title "Last Berry in the Patch." That puzzle had crossed her, and it hadn't been out of the attic for the last two years. And if you have to know, and maybe some of you do anyway, I had a little crush on Carol. I'd bought her a snot-rag with her initials on it and wrapped it myself. Mom offered, but I said no. It wasn't any lousy fifteen-cent hankie, either. Those babies were going in the Lewiston J. C. Penney's for fifty-nine cents, and it had lace all the way around the edge.

"Okay." I grumped at her. "Okay, okay, okay."

"And don't you wise-mouth me, Charlie Decker," she said grimly. "Your father is quite capable of thrashing you yet."

“Don’t I know it,” I said. “Every time we’re in the same room together, he reminds me.”

“Charlie…”

“I’m on my way,” I said quickly, heading it off. “Hang in there, Mom.”

“Don’t get dirty!” she called after me as I went out the door. “Don’t spill any ice cream on your pants! Remember to say thank you when you leave! Say hi to Mrs. Granger!”

I didn’t say anything to any of these orders, feeling that to acknowledge might be to encourage. I just jammed the hand that wasn’t carrying the package deeper into my pocket and hunched my head.

“Be a gentleman!”

Gawd.

“And remember not to start eating until Carol does!”

Dear Gawd.

I hurried to get out of her sight before she decided to run after me and check to see if I’d peed myself.

But it wasn’t a day made to feel bad on. The sky was blue and the sun was just warm enough, and there was a little breeze to chase along at your heels. It was summer vacation, and Carol might even give me a tumble. Of course, I didn’t know just what I’d do if Carol *did* give me a tumble—maybe let her tide double on my Schwinn—but I could cross that bridge when I came to it. Perhaps I was even overestimating the negative sex appeal of the corduroy suit. If Carol had a crush on Myron Floren, she was going to love me.

Then I saw Joe and started to feel stupid all over again. He was wearing ragged white Levi’s and a T-shirt. I could see him looking me up and down, and I winced. The jacket had little brass buttons with a heralds embossed on them. Rooty-toot.

“Great suit,” he said. “You look just like that guy on the Lawrence Belch show. The one with the accordion.”

“Myron Floren,” I said. “Riiight.”

He offered me a stick of gum, and I skinned it.

“My mother’s idea.” I stuck the gum into my mouth. Black Jack gum. There is no finer. I rolled it across my tongue and chomped. I was feeling better again. Joe was a friend, the only good one I ever had. He never seemed afraid of me, or revolted by my weird mannerisms (when a good

idea strikes me, for instance, I have a tendency to walk around with my face screwed up in the most godawful grimaces without even being aware of it —didn't Grace have a field day with that one). I had Joe beat in the brains department, and he had me in the making-friends department. Most kids don't give a hoot in hell for brains; they go a penny a pound, and the kid with the high I.Q. who can't play baseball or at least come in third in the local circle jerk is everybody's fifth wheel. But Joe liked my brains. He never said, but I know he did. And because everyone liked Joe, they had to at least tolerate me. I won't say I worshiped Joe McKennedy, but it was a close thing. He was my mojo.

So there we were, walking along and chewing our Black Jack, when a hand came down on my shoulder like a firecracker. I almost choked on my gum. I stumbled, turned around, and there was Dicky Cable.

Dicky was a squat kid who always somehow reminded me of a lawn mower, a big Briggs & Stratton self-propelling model with the choke stuck open. He had a big square grin, and it was chock-full of big white square teeth that fitted together on the top and bottom like the teeth in two meshing cogs. His teeth seemed to gnash and fume between his lips like revolving mower blades that are moving so fast they seem to stand still. He looked like he ate patrol boys for supper. For all I knew, he did.

"Son of a *gun,* you look slick!" He winked elaborately at Joe. "Son of a *gun,* you just look slicker than owl *shit!" Whack!* on the back again. I felt very small. About three inches, I'd say. I was scared of him—I think I had a dim idea that I might have to fight him or crawfish before the day was over, and that I would probably crawfish.

"Don't break my back, okay?" I said. But he wouldn't leave it alone. He just kept riding and riding until we got to Carol's house. I knew the worst the minute we went through the door. Nobody was dressed up. Carol was there in the middle of the room, and she looked really beautiful.

It hurt. She looked beautiful and casual, a shadow glass of sophistication over the just-beginning adolescent. She probably still cried and threw tantrums and locked herself in the bathroom, probably still listened to Beatles records and had a picture of David Cassidy, who was big that year, tucked into the corner of her vanity mirror, but none of that showed. And the fact that it didn't show hurt me and made me feel dwarfed. She had a rust-colored scarf tied into her hair. She looked fifteen or sixteen, already

filling out in front. She was wearing a brown dress. She was laughing with a bunch of kids and gesturing with her hands.

Dicky and Joe went on over and gave her their presents, and she laughed and nodded and thank-you'd, and my God but she looked nice.

I decided to leave. I didn't want her to see me in my bow tie and my corduroy suit with the little brass buttons. I didn't want to see her talking with Dicky Cable, who looked like a human Lawnboy to me but who seemed to look pretty good to her. I figured I could slip out before anyone got a really good look at me. Like Lamont Cranston, I would just cloud a few minds and then bug out. I had a buck in my pocket from weeding Mrs. Katzentz's flower garden the day before, and I could go to the movies in Brunswick if I could hook a ride, and work up a good head of self-pity sitting there in the dark.

But before I could even find the doorknob, Mrs. Granger spotted me.

It wasn't my day. Imagine a pleated skirt and one of those see-through chiffon blouses on a Sherman tank. A Sherman tank with two gun turrets. Her hair looked like a hurricane, one glump going one way and one glump the other. The two glumps were being held together somehow by a big sateen bow that was poison yellow in color.

"Charlie *Decker!*" she squealed, and spread out arms that looked like loaves of bread. *Big* loaves. I almost chickened and ran for it. She was an avalanche getting ready to happen. She was every Japanese horror monster ever made, all rolled into one, Ghidra, Mothra, Godzilla, Rodan, and Tukkan the Terrible trundling across the Granger living room. But that wasn't the bad part. The bad part was everybody looking at me—you know what I'm talking about.

She gave me a slobbery kiss on the cheek and crowed, "Well, don't you look *nice?*" And for one horribly certain second I expected her to add: "Slicker than *owl shit!*"

Well, I'm not going to torture either you or myself with a blow-by-blow. Where would be the sense? You've got the picture. Three hours of unadulterated hell. Dicky was right there with a "Well, don't you look *nice?*" at every opportunity. A couple of other kids happened over to ask me who died.

Joe was the only one who stuck by me, but even that embarrassed me a little. I could see him telling kids to lay off, and I didn't like it very well. It

made me feel like the village idiot.

I think the only one who didn't notice me at all was Carol. It would have bothered me if she had come over and asked me to dance when they put on the records, but it bothered me worse that she didn't. I couldn't dance, but it's the thought that counts.

So I stood around while the Beatles sang "The Ballad of John and Yoko" and "Let It Be," while the Adreizi Brothers sang "We Gotta Get It On Again," while Bobby Sherman sang "Hey, Mr. Sun" in his superbly tuneless style. I was giving my best imitation of a flowerpot. The party, meanwhile, went on. Did it ever. It seemed like it was going to go on eternally, the years flashing by outside like leaves in the wind, cars turning into clumps of rust, houses decaying, parents turning into dust, nations rising and falling. I had a feeling that we would still be there when Gabriel flew overhead, clutching the Judgment trump in one hand and a party favor in the other. There was ice cream, there was a big cake that said HAPPY BIRTHDAY, CAROL in green and red icing, there was more dancing, and a couple of kids wanted to play spin the bottle, but Mrs. Granger laughed a big jolly laugh and said no, haha, no no no. Oh, no.

Finally Carol clapped her hands and said we were all going outside and play follow the leader, the game which asks the burning question: Are you ready for tomorrow's society?

Everybody spilled outside. I could hear them running around and having a good time, or whatever passes for a good time when you're part of a mass puberty cramp. I lingered behind for a minute, half-thinking Carol would stop for a second, but she hurried right by. I went out and stood on the porch watching. Joe was there too, sitting with one leg hooked over the porch railing, and we both watched. Somehow Joe always seems to be where I end up, with one leg hooked over something, watching.

"She's stuck up," he said finally.

"Nah. She's just busy. Lot of people. You know."

"Shit," Joe said.

We were quiet for a minute. Someone yelled, "Hey, Joe!"

"You'll get crap all over that thing if you play," Joe said. "Your mother'll have a kitten."

"She'll have two," I said.

“Come on, Joe!” This time it was Carol. She had changed into denims, probably designed by Edith Head, and she looked flushed and pretty. Joe looked at me. He wanted to look out for me, and suddenly I felt more terrified than at any time since I woke up on that hunting trip up north. After a while, being somebody’s responsibility makes them hate you, and I was scared that Joe might hate me someday. I didn’t know all that then, not at twelve, but I sensed some of it.

“Go on,” I said.

“You sure you don’t want to—?”

“Yeah. Yeah. I got to get home anyway.”

I watched him go, hurt a little that he hadn’t offered to come with me, but relieved in a way. Then I started across the lawn toward the street.

Dicky noticed me. “You on your way, pretty boy?”

I should have said something clever like: Yeah. Give my regards to Broadway. Instead I told him to shut up.

He jackrabbited in front of me as if he had been expecting it, that big lawnmower grin covering the entire lower half of his face. He smelled green and tough, like vines in the jungle. “What was that, pretty boy?”

All of it lumped together, and I felt ugly. Really ugly. I could have spit at Hitler, that’s how ugly I felt. “I said shut up. Get out of my way.”

[In the classroom, Carol Granger put her hands over her eyes…but she didn’t tell me to stop. I respected her for that.]

Everyone was staring, but no one was saying anything. Mrs. Granger was in the house, singing “Swanee” at the top of her voice.

“Maybe you think you can shut me up.” He ran a hand through his oiled hair.

I shoved him aside. It was like being outside myself. It was the first time I ever felt that way. Someone else, some other me, was in the driver’s seat. I was along for the ride, and that was all.

He swung at me; his fist looped down and hit me on the shoulder. It just about paralyzed the big muscle in my arm. Jesus, did that hurt. It was like getting hit with an iceball.

I grabbed him, because I never could box, and shoved him backward across the lawn, that big grin steaming and fuming at me. He dug his heels in and curled an arm around my neck, as if about to kiss me. His other fist started hammering at my back, but it was like someone knocking on a door

long ago and far away. We tripped over a pink lawn flamingo and whumped to the ground.

He was strong, but I was desperate. All of a sudden, beating up Dicky Cable was my mission in life. It was what I had been put on earth for. I remembered the Bible story about Jacob wrestling with the angel, and I giggled crazily into Dicky's face. I was on top, and fighting to stay there.

But all at once he slid away from me—he was awful slippery—and he smashed me across the neck with one arm.

I let out a little *cry* and went over on my belly. He was astride my back in no time. I tried to turn, but I couldn't.

I couldn't. He was going to beat me because I couldn't. It was all senseless and horrible. I wondered where Carol was. Watching, probably. They were all watching. I felt my corduroy coat ripping out under the arms, the buttons with the heralds embossed on them ripping off one by one on the tough loam. But I couldn't turn over.

He was laughing. He grabbed my head and slammed it into the ground like a whiffle ball. "Hey, pretty boy!" *Slam*. Interior stars and the taste of grass in my mouth. Now I was the lawnmower. "Hey, pretty boy, don't you look *nice?*" He picked my head up by the hair and slammed it down again. I started to cry.

"Don't you just look dan-dan-*dandy!*" Dicky Cable cried merrily, and hammered my head into the ground again—*fore!* "Don't you just look *wooonderful!*"

Then he was off me, because Joe had dragged him off. "That's enough, goddammit!" he was shouting. "Don't you know that's enough?"

I got up, still crying. There was dirt in my hair. My head didn't hurt enough for me to still be crying, but there it was. I couldn't stop. They were all staring at me with that funny hangdog look kids get when they've gone too far, and I could see they didn't want to look at me and see me crying. They looked at their feet to make sure they were still there. They glanced around at the chain-link fence to make sure no one was stealing it. A few of them glanced over at the swimming pool in the yard next door, just in case someone might be drowning and in need of a quick rescue.

Carol was standing there, and she started to take a step forward. Then she looked around to see if anyone else was stepping forward, and no one

else was. Dicky Cable was combing his hair. There was no dirt in it. Carol shuffled her feet. The wind made ripples on her blouse.

Mrs. Granger had stopped singing "Swanee." She was on the porch, her mouth wide open.

Joe came up and put a hand on my shoulder. "Hey, Charlie," he said. "What do you say we go now, huh?"

I tried to shove him away and only made myself fall down. "Leave me alone!" I shouted at him. My voice was hoarse and raw. I was sobbing more than yelling. There was only one button left on the corduroy jacket, and it was hanging by a string. The pants were all juiced up with grass stains. I started to crawl around on the matted earth, still crying, picking up buttons. My face was hot.

Dicky was humming some spry ditty and looking as if he might like to comb his hair again. Looking back, I have to admire him for it. At least he didn't put on a crocodile face about the whole thing.

Mrs. Granger came waddling toward me. "Charlie…Charlie, *dear*—"

"Shut up, fat old *bag!*" I screamed. I couldn't see anything. It was all blurred in my eyes, and all the faces seemed to be crowding in on me. All the hands seemed to have claws. I couldn't see to pick up any more buttons. "Fat old *bag!*"

Then I ran away.

I stopped behind an empty house down on Willow Street and just sat there until all the tears dried up. There was dried snot underneath my nose. I spat on my handkerchief and wiped it off. I blew my nose. An alley cat came by, and I tried to pet it. The cat shied from my hand. I knew exactly how he felt.

The suit was pretty well shot, but I didn't care about that. I didn't even care about my mother, although she would probably call Dicky Cable's mother and complain in her cultured voice. But my father. I could see him sitting, looking, carefully poker-faced, saying: How *does the other guy look?*

And my lie.

I sat down for the best part of an hour, planning to go down to the highway and stick out my thumb, hook a ride out of town, and never come back.

But in the end I went home.

Chapter 23

Outside, a regular cop convention was shaping up. Blue trooper cars, white cruisers from the Lewiston P.D., a black-and-white from Brunswick, two more from Auburn. The police responsible for this automotive cornucopia ran hither and yon, ducked over low. More newsmen showed up. They poked cameras equipped with cobra-like telephoto lenses over the hoods of their vehicles. Sawhorses had been set up on the road above and below the school, along with double rows of those sooty little kerosene pots —to me those things always look like the bombs of some cartoon anarchist. The DPW people had put up a DETOUR sign. I guess they didn't have anything more appropriate in stock-slow! MADMAN AT WORK, for instance. Don Grace and good old Tom were hobnobbing with a huge, blocky man in a state police uniform. Don seemed almost angry. The big blocky man was listening, but shaking his head. I took him to be Captain Frank Philbrick of the Maine State Police. I wondered if he knew I had a clear shot at him.

Carol Granger spoke up in a trembling voice. The shame on her face was alarming. I hadn't told that story to shame her. "I was just a kid, Charlie."

"I know that," I said, and smiled. "You were awful pretty that day. You sure didn't look like a kid."

"I had kind of a crush on Dicky Cable, too."

"After the patty and all?"

She looked even more ashamed. "Worse than ever. I went with him to the eighth-grade picnic. He seemed…oh, daring, I guess. Wild. At the picnic he…you know, he got fresh, and I let him, a little. But that was the only time I went anyplace with him. I don't even know where he is now."

"Placerville Cemetery," Dick Keene said flatly.

It gave me a nasty start. It was as if I had just seen the ghost of Mrs. Underwood. I could still have pointed to the places where Dicky had pounded on me. The idea that he was dead made for a strange, almost dreamy terror in my mind—and I saw a reflection of what I was feeling on Carol's face. *He got fresh, and I let him, a little,* she had said. What, exactly, did that mean to a bright college-bound girl like Carol? Maybe he had kissed her. Maybe he had even gotten her out into the puckerbrush and mapped the virgin territory of her burgeoning chest. At the eighth grade picnic, God save us all. He had been daring and wild.

"What happened to him?" Don Lordi asked.

Dick spoke slowly. "He got hit by a car. That was really funny. Not ha-ha, you know, but peculiar. He got his driver's license just last October, and he used to drive like a fool. Like a crazy man. I guess he wanted everybody to know he had, you know, balls. It got so that no one would ride with him, hardly. He had this 1966 Pontiac, did all the body work himself. Painted her bottle green, with the ace of spades on the passenger side."

"Sure, I used to see that around," Melvin said. "Over by the Harlow Rec."

"Put in a Hearst four-shifter all by himself," Dick said. "Four-barrel carb, overhead cam, fuel injection. She purred. Ninety in second gear. I was with him one night when he went up the Stackpole Road in Harlow at ninety-five. We go around Brissett's Bend and we start to slide. I hit the floor. You're right, Charlie. He looked weird when he was smiling. I dunno if he looked exactly like a lawnmower, but he sure looked weird. He just kept grinning and grinning all the time we were sliding. And he goes…like, to himself he goes, 'I can hold 'er, I can hold 'er,' over and over again. And he did, I made him stop, and I walked home. My legs were all rubber. A couple of months later he got hit by a delivery truck up in Lewiston while he was crossing Lisbon Street. Randy Milliken was with him, and Randy said he wasn't even drunk or stoned. It was the truck driver's fault entirely. He went to jail for ninety days. But Dicky was dead. Funny."

Carol looked sick and white. I was afraid she might faint, and so, to take her mind somewhere else, I said, "Was your mother mad at me, Carol?"

"Huh?" She looked around in that funny, startled way she had.

"I called her a bag. A fat old bag, I think."

“Oh.” She wrinkled her nose and then smiled, gratefully, I think, picking up on the gambit. “She was. She sure was. She thought that fight was all your fault.”

“Your mother and my mother used to both be in that club, didn’t they?”

“Books and Bridge? Yeah.” Her legs were still uncrossed, and now her knees were apart a little. She laughed. “I’ll tell you the truth, Charlie. I never really cared for your mother, even though I only saw her a couple of times to say hi to. My mother was always talking about how dreadfully *intelligent* Mrs. Decker was, what a very fine *grasp* she had on the novels of Henry James, stuff like that. And what a fine little *gentleman you* were.”

“Slicker than owl shit,” I agreed gravely. “You know, I used to get the same stuff about you.”

“You did?”

“Sure.” An idea suddenly rose up and smacked me on the nose. How could I have possibly missed it so long, an old surmiser like me? I laughed with sudden sour delight. “And I bet I know why she was so determined I was going to wear my suit. It’s called ‘Matchmaking,’ or ‘Wouldn’t They Make a Lovely Couple?’ or, ‘Think of the Intelligent Offspring.’ Played by all the best families, Carol. Will you marry me?”

Carol looked at me with her mouth open. “They were…” She couldn’t seem to finish it.

“That’s what I think.”

She smiled; a little giggle escaped her. Then she laughed right out loud. It seemed a little disrespectful of the dead, but I let it pass. Although, to tell you the truth, Mrs. Underwood was never far from my mind. After all, I was almost standing on her.

“That big guy’s coming,” Billy Sawyer said.

Sure enough, Frank Philbrick was striding toward the school, looking neither right nor left. I hoped the news photographers were getting his good side; who knew, he might want to use some of the pix on this year’s Xmas cards. He walked through the main door. Down the hall, as if in another world, I could hear his vague steps pause and then go up to the office. It occurred to me in a strange sort of way that he seemed real only inside. Everything beyond the windows was television. They were the show, not me. My classmates felt the same way. It was on their faces.

Silence.

Chink. The intercom.

"Decker?"

"Yes, sir?" I said.

He was a heavy breather. You could hear him puffing and blowing into the mike up there like some large and sweaty animal. I don't like that, never have. My father is like that on the telephone. A lot of heavy breathing in your ear, so you can almost smell the scotch and Pall Malls on his breath. It always seems unsanitary and somehow homosexual.

"This is a very funny situation you've put us all in, Decker."

"I guess it is, sir."

"We don't particularly like the idea of shooting you."

"No, sir, neither do I. I wouldn't advise you to try."

Heavy breathing. "Okay, let's get it out of the henhouse and see what we got in the sack. What's your price?"

"Price?" I said. "Price?" For one loony moment I had the impression he had taken me for an interesting piece of talking furniture—a Morris chair, maybe, equipped to huckster the prospective buyer with all sorts of pertinent info. At first the idea struck me funny. Then it made me mad.

"For letting them go. What do you want? Air time? You got it. Some sort of statement to the papers? You got that." *Snort-snort-snort.* Likewise, puff-puff-puff. "But let's do it and get it done before this thing turns into a hairball. But you got to tell us what you want."

"You," I said.

The breath stopped. Then it started again, puffing and blowing. It was starting to really get on my nerves. "You'll have to explain that," he said.

"Certainly, sir," I said. "We can make a deal. Would you like to make a deal? Is that what you were saying?"

No answer. Puff, snort. Philbrick was on the six-o'clock news every Memorial Day and Labor Day, reading a please-drive-safely message off the teleprompter with a certain lumbering ineptitude that was fascinating and almost endearing. I had felt there was something familiar about him, something intimate that smacked *of deja vu*. Now I could place it. The breathing. Even on TV he sounded like a bull getting ready to mount Farmer Brown's cow in the back forty.

"What's your deal?"

“Tell me something first,” I said. “Is there anybody out there who thinks I might just decide to see how many people I can plug down here? Like Don Grace, for instance?”

“That piece *of* shit,” Sylvia said, then clapped a hand over her mouth.

“Who said that?” Philbrick barked.

Sylvia went white.

“Me,” I said. “I have certain transsexual tendencies too, sir.” I didn’t figure he would know what that meant and would be too wary to ask. “Could you answer my question?”

“Some people think you might go the rest *of* the way out of your gourd, yes,” he answered weightily. Somebody at the back of the room tittered. I don’t think the intercom picked it up.

“Okay, then,” I said. “The deal is this. You be the hero. Come down here. Unarmed. Come inside with your hands on your head. I’ll let everybody go. Then I’ll blow your fucking head off. Sir. How’s that for a deal? You buy it?”

Puff, *snort, blow.* “You got a dirty mouth, fella. There are girls down there. Young girls.”

Irma Bates looked around, startled, as if someone had just called her.

“The deal,” I said. “The deal.”

“No,” Philbrick said. “You’d shoot me and hold on to the hostages.” Puff, *snort.* “But I’ll come down. Maybe we can figure something out.”

“Fella,” I said patiently, “if you sign off and I don’t see you going out the same door you came in within fifteen seconds, someone in here is just going to swirl down the spout.”

Nobody looked particularly worried at the thought of just swirling down the spout.

Puff, puff. “Your chances of getting out of this alive are getting slimmer.”

“Frank, my man, none of us get out of it alive. Even my old man knows that.”

“Will you come out?”

“No.”

“If that’s how you feel.” He didn’t seem upset. “There’s a boy named Jones down there. I want to speak with him.”

It seemed okay. “You’re on, Ted,” I told him. “Your big chance, boy. Don’t blow it. Folks, this kid is going to dance his balls off before your very eyes.”

Ted was looking earnestly at the black grating of the intercom. “This is Ted Jones, sir.” On him, “sir” sounded good.

“Is everyone down there still all right, Jones?”

“Yes, sir.”

“How do you judge Decker’s stability?”

“I think he’s apt to do anything, sir,” he said, looking directly at me. There was a savage leer in his eyes. Carol looked suddenly angry. She opened her mouth as if to refute, and then, perhaps remembering her upcoming responsibilities as valedictorian and Leading Lamp of the Western World, she closed her mouth with a snap.

“Thank you, Mr. Jones.”

Ted looked absurdly pleased at being called mister.

“Decker?”

“Right here.”

Snort, snort. “Be seeing you.”

“I better see you,” I said. “Fifteen seconds.” Then, as an afterthought: “Philbrick?”

“Yeah?”

“You’ve got a shitty habit, you know it? I’ve noticed it on all those TV drive-safely pitches that you do. You breathe in people’s ears. You sound like a stallion in heat, Philbrick. That’s a shitty habit. You also sound like you’re reading off a teleprompter, even when you’re not. You ought to take care of stuff like that. You might save a life.”

Philbrick puffed and snorted thoughtfully.

“Screw, buddy,” he said, and the intercom clicked off.

Exactly twelve seconds later he came out the front door, striding stolidly along. When he got to the cars that had been driven onto the lawn, there was another conference. Philbrick gestured a lot.

Nobody said anything. Pat Fitzgerald was chewing a fingernail thoughtfully. Pig Pen had taken out another pencil and was studying it. And Sandra Cross was looking at me steadily. There seemed to be a kind of mist between us that made her glow.

“What about sex?” Carol said suddenly, and when everyone looked at her, she colored.

“Male,” Melvin said, and a couple of the jocks in the back of the room haw-hawed.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

Carol looked very much as if she wished her mouth had been stitched closed. “I thought when someone started to act…well…you know, strangely…” She stopped in confusion, but Susan Brooks sprang to the ramparts.

“That’s right,” she said. “And you all ought to stop grinning. Everyone thinks sex is so dirty. That’s half what’s the matter with all of us. We worry about it.” She looked protectively at Carol.

“That’s what I meant,” Carol said. “Are you…well, did you have some bad experience?”

“Nothing since that time I went to bed with Mom,” I said blandly.

An expression of utter shock struck her face, and then she saw I was joking. Pig Pen snickered dolefully and went on looking at his pencil.

“No, really,” she said.

“Well,” I said, frowning. “I’ll tell about my sex life if you’ll tell about yours.”

“Oh…” She looked shocked again, but in a pleasant way.

Gracie Stanner laughed. “Cough up, Carol.” I had always gotten a murky impression that there was no love lost between those two girls, but now Grace seemed genuinely to be joking—as if some understood but never-mentioned inequality had been erased.

“‘Ray, ‘ray,” Corky Herald said, grinning.

Carol was blushing furiously. “I’m sorry I asked.”

“Go on,” Don Lordi said. “It won’t hurt.”

“Everybody would tell,” Carol said. “I know the way bo…the way people talk around.”

“Secrets,” Mike Gavin whispered hoarsely, “give me more secrets.” Everybody laughed, but it was getting to be no laughing matter.

“You’re not being fair,” Susan Brooks said.

“That’s right,” I said. “Let’s drop it.”

“Oh…never mind,” Carol said. “I’ll talk. I’ll tell you something.”

It was my turn to be surprised. Everybody looked at her expectantly. I didn't really know what they expected to hear—a bad case of penis envy, maybe, or Ten Nights with a Candle. I figured they were in for a disappointment, whatever it was. No whips, no chains, no night sweats. Small-town virgin, fresh, bright, pretty, and someday maybe she would blow Placerville and have a real life. Sometimes they change in college. Some of them discover existentialism and anomie and hash pipes. Sometimes they only join sororities and continue with the same sweet dream that began in junior high school, a dream so common to the pretty small-town virgins that it almost could have been cut from a Simplicity pattern, like a jumper or a Your Yummy Summer blouse or play skirt. There's a whammy on bright girls and boys. If the bright ones have a twisted fiber, it shows. If they don't, you can figure them as easily as square roots. Girls like Carol have a steady boyfriend and enjoy a little necking (but, as the Tubes say, "Don't Touch Me There"), nothing overboard. It's okay, I guess. You'd expect more, but, so sorry please, there just isn't. Bright kids are like TV dinners. That's all right. I don't carry a big stick on that particular subject. Smart girls are just sort of dull.

And Carol Granger had that image. She went steady with Buck Thorne (the perfect American name). Buck was the center of the Placerville High Greyhounds, which had posted an 11-0 record the previous fall, a fact that Coach Bob "Stone Balls" Stoneham made much of at our frequent school-spirit assemblies.

Thorne was a good-natured shit who weighed in at a cool two-ten; not exactly the brightest thing on two feet (but college material, of course), and Carol probably had no trouble keeping him in line. I've noticed that pretty girls make the best lion tamers, too. Besides, I always had an idea that Buck Thorne thought the sexiest thing in the world was a quarterback sneak right up the middle.

"I'm a virgin," Carol said defiantly, startling me up out of my thoughts. She crossed her legs as if to prove it symbolically, then abruptly uncrossed them. "And I don't think it's so bad, either. Being a virgin is like being bright."

"It is?" Grace Stanner asked doubtfully.

"You have to work at it," Carol said. "That's what I meant, you have to work at it." The idea seemed to please her. It scared the hell out of me.

"You mean Buck never…"

"Oh, he used to want to. I suppose he still does. But I made things pretty clear to him early in the game. And I'm not frigid or anything, or a puritan. It's just that…" She trailed off, searching.

"You wouldn't want to get pregnant," I said.

"No!" she said almost contemptuously. "I know all about that." With something like shock I realized she was angry and upset because she was. Anger is a very difficult emotion for a programmed adolescent to handle. "I don't live in books all the time. I read all about birth control in…" She bit her lip as the contradiction of what she was saying struck her.

"Well," I said. I tapped the stock of the pistol lightly on the desk blotter. "This is serious, Carol. Very serious. I think a girl should know why she's a virgin, don't you?"

"*I know* why!"

"Oh." I nodded helpfully. Several girls were looking at her with interest.

"Because…"

Silence. Faintly, the sound of Jerry Kesserling using his whistle to direct traffic.

"Because…"

She looked around. Several of them flinched and looked down at their desks. Just then I would have given my house and lot, as the old farmers say, to know just how many virgins we had in here. "And you don't all have to stare at me! I didn't ask you to stare at me! I'm not going to talk about it! I don't *have* to talk about it!"

She looked at me bitterly.

"People tear you down, that's it. They grind you if you let them, just like Pig Pen said. They all want to pull you down to their level and make you dirty. Look at what they are doing to you, Charlie."

I wasn't sure they had done anything to me just yet, but I kept my mouth shut.

"I was walking along Congress Street in Portland just before Christmas last year. I was with Donna Taylor. We were buying Christmas presents. I'd just bought my sister a scarf in Porteus-Mitchell, and we were talking about it and laughing. Just silly stuff. We were giggling. It was about four o'clock and just starting to get dark. It was snowing. All the colored lights were on, and the shop windows were full of glitter and packages…pretty…and there

was one of those Salvation Army Santa Clauses on the corner by Jones's Book Shop. He was ringing his bell and smiling. I felt good. I felt really good. It was like the Christmas spirit, and all that. I was thinking about getting home and having hot chocolate with whipped cream on top of it. And then this old car drove by, and whoever was driving cranked his window down and yelled, 'Hi, cunt!'"

Anne Lasky jumped. I have to admit that the word did sound awfully funny coming out of Carol Granger's mouth.

"Just like that," she said bitterly. "It was all wrecked. Spoiled. Like an apple you thought was good and then bit into a worm hole. 'Hi, cunt.' As if that was all there was, no person, just a huh-h-h…" Her mouth pulled down in a trembling, agonized grimace. "And that's like being bright, too. They want to stuff things into your head until it's all filled up. It's a different hole, that's all. That's all."

Sandra Cross's eyes were half-closed, as if she dreamed. "You know," she said. "I feel funny. I feel…"

I wanted to jump up and tell her to keep her mouth shut, tell her not to incriminate herself in this fool's parade, but I couldn't. Repeat, couldn't. If I didn't play by my rules, who would?

"I feel like this is all," she said.

"Either all brains or all cunt," Carol said with brittle good humor. "Doesn't leave room for much else, does it?"

"Sometimes," Sandra said, "I feel very empty."

"I…" Carol began, and then looked at Sandra, startled. "You do?"

"Sure." She looked thoughtfully out the broken windows. "I like to hang out clothes on windy days. Sometimes that's all I feel like. A sheet on the line. You try to get interested in things…Politics, the school…I was on the Student Council last semester…but it's not real, and it's awfully dull. And there aren't a lot of minorities or anything around here to fight for, or… well, you know. Important things. And so I let Ted do that to me."

I looked carefully at Ted, who was looking at Sandra with his face frozen. A great blackness began to drizzle down on me. I felt my throat close.

"It wasn't so hot," Sandra said. "I don't know what all the shouting's about. It's…" She looked at me, her eyes widening, but I could hardly see her. But I could see Ted. He was very clear. In fact, he seemed to be lit by a

strange golden glow that stood out in the new clotted darkness like a halo, a supernormal aura.

I raised the pistol very carefully in both hands.

For a moment I thought about the inner caves of my body, the living machines that run on and on in the endless dark.

I was going to shoot him, but they shot me first.

Chapter 24

I know what happened now, although I didn't then.

They had the best sharpshooter in the state out there, a state policeman named Daniel Malvern, from Kent's Hill. There was a picture of him in the Lewiston Sun after everything was all over. He was a small man with a crew cut. He looked like an accountant. They had given him a huge Mauser with a telescopic sight. Daniel Malvern took the Mauser to a gravel pit several miles away, test-fired it, and then brought it back and walked down to one of the cruisers parked on the lawn with the rifle stuffed down his pants leg. He rested in the prone position behind the front fender, in deep shadow. He gauged the windage with a wet thumb. Nil. He peered through the telescopic sight. Through the 30X cross-hatched lens, I must have looked as big as a bulldozer. There was not even any window glass to throw a glare, because I had broken it earlier when I fired the pistol to make them stop using the bullhorn. An easy shot. But Dan Malvern took his time. After all, it was probably the most important shot of his life. I was not a clay pigeon; my guts were going to splatter all over the blackboard behind me when the bullet made its mushrooming exit. Crime Does Not Pay. Loony Bites the Dust. And when I half-rose, half-leaned over Mrs. Underwood's desk to put a bullet in Ted Jones, Dan's big chance came. My body half-twisted toward him. He fired his weapon and put the bullet exactly where he had hoped and expected to put it: through my breast pocket, which lay directly over the living machine of my heart.

Where it struck the hard steel of Titus, the Helpful Padlock.

Chapter 25

I held on to the pistol.

The impact of the slug knocked me straight backward against the blackboard, where the chalk ledge bit cruelly into my back. Both of my cordovan loafers flew off. I hit the floor on my fanny. I didn't know what had happened. There was too much all at once. A huge auger of pain drilled my chest, followed by sudden numbness. The ability to breathe stopped. Spots flashed in front of my eyes.

Irma Bates was screaming. Her eyes were closed, her fists were clenched, and her face was a hectic, patched red with effort. It was far away and dreamy, coming from a mountain or a tunnel.

Ted Jones was getting out of his seat again, floating really, in a slow and dreamy motion. This time he was going for the door. "They got the son of a bitch!" His voice sounded incredibly slow and draggy, like a 78-RPM record turned down to *33 1/3*. "They got the crazy—"

"Sit down."

He didn't hear me. I wasn't surprised. I could hardly hear myself. I didn't have any wind to talk with. He was reaching for the doorknob when I fired the pistol. The bullet slammed into the wood beside his head, and he shied away. When he turned around, his face was a stew of changing emotions: white astonishment, agonized unbelief, and twisted, murdering hate.

"You can't…you're…"

"Sit down." A little better. Perhaps six seconds had gone by since I had been knocked on my ass. "Stop yelling, Irma."

"You're shot, Charlie," Grace Stanner said calmly.

I looked outside. The cops were rushing the building. I fired twice and made myself breathe. The auger struck again, threatening to explode my chest with pain.

"*Get back! I'll shoot them!*"

Frank Philbrick stopped and looked around wildly. He seemed to want a telephone call from Jesus. He looked confused enough to try and carry on with it, so I fired again, up in the air. It was his turn to go a hundred miles in his head during half a second. "Get back!" he yelled. "Get the Christ back!"

They retreated, getting back even quicker than they had gotten down.

Ted Jones was edging toward me. That boy was simply not part of the real universe. "Do you want me to shoot your weenie off?" I asked.

He stopped, but that terrifying, twisted expression was still on his face. "You're dead," he hissed. "Lie down, God damn you."

"Sit down, Ted."

The pain in my chest was a live thing, horrible. The left side of my rib cage felt as if it had been struck by Maxwell's silver hammer. They were staring at me, my captive class, with expressions of preoccupied horror. I didn't dare look down at myself because of what I might see. The clock said 10:55.

"DECKER!"

"Sit down, Ted."

He lifted his lip in an unconscious facial gesture that made him look like a slatsided hound that I had seen lying mortally wounded beside a busy street when I was just a kid. He thought about it, and then he sat down. He had a good set of sweat circles started under his armpits.

"DECKER! MR. DENVER IS GOING UP TO THE OFFICE!"

It was Philbrick on the bullhorn, and not even the asexual sexuality of the amplification could hide how badly he was shaken up. An hour before, it would have pleased me—fulfilled me—in a savage way, but now I felt nothing.

"HE WANTS TO TALK TO YOU!"

Tom walked out from behind one of the police cars and started across the lawn, walking slowly, as if he expected to be shot at any second. Even at a distance, he looked ten years older. Not even that could please me. Not even that.

I got up a little at a time, fighting the pain, and stepped into my loafers. I almost fell, and had to clutch the desk with my free hand for support.

"Oh, Charlie," Sylvia moaned.

I fully loaded the pistol again, this time keeping it pointed toward them (I don't think even Ted knew it couldn't be fired with the clip sprung), doing it slowly so I could put off looking down at myself for as long as possible. My chest throbbed and ached. Sandra Cross seemed lost again in whatever fuzzy dream it was that she contemplated.

The clip snapped back into place, and I looked down at myself almost casually. I was wearing a neat blue shirt (I've always been fond of solid colors), and I expected to see it matted with my blood. But it wasn't.

There was a large dark hole, dead center through my breast pocket, which was on the left. An uneven scattering of smaller holes radiated out from all around it, like one of those solar-system maps that show the planets going around the sun. I reached inside the pocket very carefully. That was when I remembered Titus, whom I had rescued from the wastebasket. I pulled him out very carefully. The class went "*Aaahhh!*" as if I had just sawed a lady in half or pulled a hundred-dollar bill out of Pig Pen's nose. None of them asked why I was carrying my combination lock in my pocket. I was glad. Ted was looking at Titus bitterly, and suddenly I was very angry at Ted. And I wondered how he would like to eat poor old Titus for his lunch.

The bullet had smashed through the hard, high-density plastic dial, sending high-speed bits of shrapnel out through my shirt. Not one of them had touched my flesh. The steel behind the face had caught the slug, had turned it into a deadly lead blossom with three bright petals. The whole lock was twisted, as if by fire. The semi-circular lock bar had been pulled like taffy. The back side of the lock had bulged but not broken through.

[It was a year and a half later when I saw that commercial on TV for the first time. The one where the guy with the rifle takes aim at the padlock nailed to the board. You even get a look through the telescopic sight at the padlock—a Yale, a Master, I don't know which. The guy pulls the trigger. And you see that lock jump and dent and mash, and it looked in that commercial just the way old Titus looked when I took him out of my pocket. They show it happening in regular motion, and then they show it in slow motion, and the first and only time I saw it, I leaned down between my

legs and puked between my ankles. They took me away. They took me back to my room. And the next day my pet shrink here looked at a note and said, "They tell me you had a setback yesterday, Charlie. Want to talk about it?" But I couldn't talk about it. I've never been able to talk about it. Until now.]

Chink! on the intercom.

"Charlie?"

"Just a minute, Tom. Don't rush me."

"Charlie, you have to—"

"Shut the fuck up."

I unbuttoned my shirt and opened it. The class went "*Aaahhh!*" again. Titus was imprinted on my chest in angry purple, and the flesh had been mashed into an indentation that looked deep enough to hold water. I didn't like to look at it, any more than I liked to look at the old drunk with the bag of flesh below his nose, the one that always hung around Gogan's downtown. It made me feel nauseated. I closed my shirt.

"Tom, those bastards tried to shoot me."

"They didn't mean—"

"Don't tell me what they didn't mean to do!" I screamed at him. There was a crazy note in my voice that made me feel even sicker. "You get your old cracked ass out there and tell that mother-fucker Philbrick he almost had a bloodbath down here, have you got it?"

"Charlie…" He was whining.

"Shut up, Tom. I'm through fooling with you. I'm in the driver's seat. Not you, not Philbrick, not the superintendent of schools, not God. Have you got it?"

"Charlie, let me explain."

"HAVE YOU GOT IT?"

"Yes, but—"

"All right. We've got that straight. So you go back and give him a message, Tom. Tell him that I don't want to see him or anyone else out there make a move during the next hour. No one is going to come in and talk on this goddamn intercom, and no one else is going to try and shoot me. At noon I want to talk to Philbrick again. Can you remember all that, Tom?"

"Yes, Charlie. All right, Charlie." He sounded relieved and foolish. "They just wanted me to tell you it was a mistake, Charlie. Somebody's gun

went off by accident and—

"One other thing, Tom. Very important."

"What, Charlie?"

"You need to know where you stand with that guy Philbrick, Tom. He gave you a shovel and told you to walk behind the ox cart, and you're doing it. I gave him a chance to put his ass on the line, and he wouldn't do it. Wake up, Tom. Assert yourself."

"Charlie, you have to understand what a terrible position you're putting us all in."

"Get out, Tom."

He clicked off. We all watched him come out through the main doors and start back toward the cars. Philbrick came over to him and put a hand on his arm. Tom shook it off. A lot of the kids smiled at that. I was past smiling. I wanted to be home in my bed and dreaming all of this.

"Sandra," I said. "I believe you were telling us about your *affaire de coeur* with Ted."

Ted threw a dark glance at me. "You don't want to say anything, Sandy. He's just trying to make all of us look dirty like he is. He's sick and full of germs. Don't let him infect you with what he's got."

She smiled. She was really radiant when she smiled like a child. I felt a bitter nostalgia, not for her, exactly, or for any imagined purity (Dale Evans panties and all that), but for something I could not precisely put my hand on. Her, maybe. Whatever it was, it made me feel ashamed.

"But I want to," she said. "I want to get it on, too. I always have."

It was eleven o'clock on the nose. The activity outside seemed to have died. I was sitting well back from the windows now. I thought Philbrick would give me my hour. He wouldn't dare do anything else now. I felt better, the pain in my chest receding a little. But my head felt very strange, as if my brains were running without coolant and overheating like a big hot rod engine in the desert. At times I was almost tempted to feel (foolish conceit) that I was holding them myself, by sheer willpower. Now I know, of course, that nothing could have been further from the truth. I had one real hostage that day, and his name was Ted Jones.

"We just did it," Sandra said, looking down at her desk and tracing the engravings there with a shaped thumbnail. I could see the part in her hair. She parted it on the side, like a boy. "Ted asked me to go to the Wonderland

dance with him, and I said I would. I had a new formal." She looked at me reproachfully. "You never asked me, Charlie."

Could it be that I was shot in the padlock only ten minutes ago? I had an insane urge to ask them if it had really happened. How strange they all were!

"So we went to that, and afterward we went to the Hawaiian Hut. Ted knows the man who runs it and got us cocktails. Just like the grown-ups." It was hard to tell if there was sarcasm in her voice or not.

Ted's face was carefully blank, but the others were looking at him as if they were seeing a strange bug. Here was a kid, one of their own, who knew the man who runs it. Corky Herald was obviously chewing it and not liking it.

"I didn't think I'd like the drinks, because everybody says liquor tastes horrible at first, but I did. I had a gin fizz, and it tickled my nose." She looked pensively in front of her. "There were little straws in it, red ones, and I didn't know if you drank through them or just stirred your drink with them, until Ted told me. It was a very nice time. Ted talked about how nice it was playing golf at Poland Springs. He said he'd take me sometime and teach me the game, if I wanted."

Ted was curling and uncurling his lip again, doglike.

"He wasn't, you know, fresh or anything. He kissed me good night, though, and he wasn't a bit nervous about it. Some boys are just miserable all the way home, wondering if they should try to kiss you good night or not. I always kissed them, just so they wouldn't feel bad. If they were yucky, I just pretended I was licking a letter."

I remembered the first time I took Sandy Cross out, to the regular Saturday-night dance at the high school. I had been miserable all the way home, wondering if I should kiss her good night or not. I finally didn't.

"After that, we went out three more times. Ted was very nice. He could always think of funny things to say, but he never told dirty jokes or anything, you know, like that. We did some necking, and that was all. Then I didn't see him to go out with for a long time, not until this April. He asked me if I wanted to go to the Rollerdrome in Lewiston."

I had wanted to ask her to go to the Wonderland dance with me, but I hadn't dared. Joe, who always got dates when he wanted them, kept saying why don't you, and I kept getting more nervous and kept telling him to fuck

off. Finally I got up the stuff to call her house, but I had to hang up the telephone after one ring and run to the bathroom and throw up. As I told you, my stomach is bad.

"We were having a pretty blah time, when all of a sudden these kids got into an argument on the middle of the floor," Sandra said. "Harlow boys and Lewiston boys, I think. Anyway, a big fight started. Some of them were fighting on their roller skates, but most of them had taken them off. The man who runs it came out and said if they didn't stop, he was going to close. People were getting bloody noses and skating around and kicking people that had fallen down, and punching and yelling horrible things. And all the time, the jukebox was turned up real loud, playing Rolling Stones music."

She paused, and then went on: "Ted and I were standing in one corner of the floor, by the bandstand. They have live music on Saturday nights, you know. This one boy skated by, wearing a black jacket. He had long hair and pimples. He laughed and waved at Ted when he went by and yelled, 'Fuck her, buddy, I did!' And Ted just reached out and popped him upside the head. The kid went skating right into the middle part of the rink and tripped over some kid's shoes and fell on his head. Anyway, Ted was looking at me, and his eyes were, you know, almost bugging out of his head. He was grinning. You know, that's really the only time I ever really saw Ted grin, like he was having a good time.

"Ted goes to me, 'I'll be right back,' and he walks across the rink to that inside part where the kid who said that was still getting up. Ted grabbed him by the back of the jacket and…I don't know…started to yank him back and forth…and the kid couldn't turn around…and Ted just kept yanking him back and forth, and that kid's head was bouncing, and then his jacket ripped right down the middle. And he goes, 'I'll kill you for ripping my best jacket, you m. f.' So Ted hit him again, and the kid fell down, and Ted threw the piece of his jacket he was holding right down on top of him. Then he came back to where I was standing, and we left. We drove out into Auburn to a gravel pit he knew about. It was on that road to Lost Valley, I think. Then we did it. In the back seat."

She was tracing the graffiti on her desk again. "It didn't hurt very much. I thought it would, but it didn't. It was nice." She sounded as if she were discussing a Walt Disney feature film, one of those with all the cute little

animals. Only, this one was starring Ted Jones as the Bald-Headed Woodchuck.

"He didn't use one of those things like he said he would, but I didn't get pregnant or anything."

Slow red was beginning to creep out of the collar of Ted's khaki army shirt, spreading up his neck and over his cheeks. His face remained fumingly expressionless.

Sandra's hands made slow, languorous gestures. I suddenly knew that her natural habitat would be in a porch hammock at the very August height of summer, temperature ninety-two in the shade, reading a book (or perhaps just staring out at the heat shimmer rising over the road), a can of Seven-Up beside her with an elbow straw in it, dressed in cool white short-shorts and a brief halter with the straps pushed down, small diamonds of sweat stippled across the upper swell of her breasts and her lower stomach….

"He apologized afterward. He acted uncomfortable, and I felt a little bad for him. He kept saying he would marry me if…you know, if I got preggers. He was really upset. And I go, 'Well, let's not buy trouble, Teddy,' and he goes, 'Don't call me that, it's a baby name.' I think he was surprised I did it with him. And I didn't get preggers. There just didn't seem to be that much to it.

"Sometimes I feel like a doll. Not really real. You know it? I fix my hair, and every now and then I have to hem a skirt, or maybe I have to baby-sit the kids when Mom and Dad go out. And it all just seems very fake. Like I could peek behind the living-room wall and it would be cardboard, with a director and a cameraman getting ready for the next scene. Like the grass and the sky were painted on canvas flats. Fake." She looked at me earnestly. "Did you ever feel like that, Charlie?"

I thought about it very carefully. "No," I said. "I can't remember that ever crossing my mind, Sandy."

"It crossed mine. Even more after with Ted. But I didn't get pregnant or anything. I used to think every girl got pregnant the first time, without fail. I tried to imagine what it would be like, telling my parents. My father would get real mad and want to know who the son of a bee was, and my mother would cry and say, 'I thought we raised you right.' That would have been real. But after a while I stopped thinking about that. I couldn't even

remember exactly what it felt like, having him…well, inside me. So I went back to the Rollerdrome."

The room was totally silent. Never in her wildest dreams could Mrs. Underwood have hoped to command such attention as Sandra Cross commanded now.

"This boy picked me up. I let him pick me up." Her eyes had picked up a strange sparkle. "I wore my shortest skirt. My powder-blue one. And a thin blouse. Later on, we went out back. And *that* seemed real. He wasn't polite at all. He was sort of…jerky. I didn't know him at all. I kept thinking that maybe he was one of those sex maniacs. That he might have a knife. That he might make me take dope. Or that I might get pregnant. I felt *alive*."

Ted Jones had finally turned and was looking at Sandra with an almost woodcut expression of horror and dead revulsion. It all seemed like a dream —something out of *le moyen age,* a dark passion play.

"That was Saturday night, and the band was playing. You could hear it out in the parking lot, but kind of faint. The Rollerdrome doesn't look like much from the back, just all boxes and crates piled up, and trashcans full of Coke bottles. I was scared, but I was excited, too. He was breathing really fast and holding on to my wrist tight, as if he expected me to try to get away. He…"

Ted made a horrid gagging sound. It was hand to believe that anyone in my peer group could be touched so painfully by anything other than the death of a parent. Again I admired him.

"He had an old black car, and it made me think of how my mother used to tell me when I was just little that sometimes strange men want you to get in the car with them and you should never do it. That excited me too. I can remember thinking: What if he kidnaps me and takes me to some old shack in the country and holds me for ransom? He opened the back door, and I got in. He started to kiss me. His mouth was all greasy, like he'd been eating pizza. They sell pizza inside for twenty cents a slice. He started to feel me up, and I could see he was smudging pizza on my blouse. Then we were lying down, and I pulled my skirt up for him—"

"*Shut up!*" Ted cried out with savage suddenness. He brought both fists crashing down on his desk, and everybody jumped. "You *rotten whore! You can't tell that in front of people! Shut your mouth or I'll shut it for you! You* __"

"You shut up, Teddy, or I'll knock your teeth down your fucking throat," Dick Keene said coldly. "You got yours, didn't you?"

Ted gaped at him. The two of them shot a lot of pool together down at the Harlow Rec, and sometimes went cruising in Ted's car. I wondered if they would be hanging out together when this was all over. I had my doubts.

"He didn't smell very nice," Sandra continued, as if there had been no interruption at all. "But he was hard. And bigger than Ted. Not circumcised, either. I remember that. It looked like a plum when he pushed it out of, you know, his foreskin. I thought it might hurt even, though I wasn't a virgin anymore. I thought the police might come and arrest us. I knew they walked through the parking lot to make sure no one was stealing hubcaps or anything.

"And a funny thing started to happen inside me, before he even got my pants down. I never felt anything so good. Or so *real*." She swallowed. Her face was flushed. "He touched me with his hand, and I went. Just like that. And the funny thing was, he didn't even get to do it. He was trying to get it in and I was trying to help him and it kept rubbing against my leg and all of a sudden…you know. And he just laid there on top of me for a minute, and then he said in my ear: 'You little bitch. You did that on purpose,' And that was all."

She shook her head vaguely. "But it was very real. I can remember everything—the music, the way he smiled, the sound his zipper made when he opened it—everything."

She smiled at me, that strange, dreamy smile.

"But this has been better, Charlie."

And the strange thing was, I couldn't tell if I felt sick or not. I didn't think I did, but it was really too close to call. I guess when you turn off the main road, you have to be prepared to see some funny houses. "How do people know they're real?" I muttered.

"What, Charlie?"

"Nothing."

I looked at them very carefully. They didn't look sick, any of them. There was a healthy sheen on every eye. There was something in me (maybe it came over on the *Mayflower)* that wanted to know: *How could she let that beyond the walls of herself? How could she say that?* But there

was nothing in the faces that I saw to echo that thought. There would have been in Philbrick's face. In good old Tom's face. Probably not in Don Grace's, but he would have been thinking it. Secretly, all the evening news shows notwithstanding, I'd held the belief that things change but people don't. It was something of a horror to begin realizing that all those years I'd been playing baseball on a soccer field. Pig Pen was still studying the bitter lines of his pencil. Susan Brooks only looked sweetly sympathetic. Dick Keene had a half-interested, half-lustful expression on his face. Corky's head was furrowed and frowning as he wrestled with it. Gracie looked slightly surprised, but that was all. Irma Bates merely looked vapid. I don't think she had recovered from seeing me shot. Were the lives of all our elders so plain that Sandy's story would have made lurid reading for them? Or were all of theirs so strange and full of terrifying mental foliage that their classmate's sexual adventure was on a level with winning a pinball replay? I didn't want to think about it. I was in no position to be reviewing moral implications.

Only Ted looked sick and horrified, and he no longer counted.

"I don't know what's going to happen," Carol Granger said, mildly worried. She looked around. "I'm afraid all of this changes things. I don't like it." She looked at me accusingly. "I liked the way things were going, Charlie. I don't want things to change after this is over."

"Heh," I said.

But that kind of comment had no power over the situation. Things had gotten out of control. There was no real way that could be denied anymore. I had a sudden urge to laugh at all of them, to point out that I had started out as the main attraction and had ended up as the sideshow.

"I have to go to the bathroom," Irma Bates said suddenly.

"Hold it," I said. Sylvia laughed.

"Turnabout is fair play," I said. "I promised to tell you about my sex life. In all actuality, there isn't very much to tell about, unless you read palms. However, there is one little story which you might find interesting."

Sarah Pasterne yawned, and I felt a sudden, excruciating urge to blow her head off. But number two must try harder, as they say in the rent-a-car ads. Some cats drive faster, but Decker vacuums all the psychic cigarette butts from the ashtrays of your mind.

I was suddenly reminded of that Beatles song that starts off: “I read the news today, oh boy…”

I told them:

Chapter 26

In the summer before my junior year at Placerville, Joe and I drove up to Bangor to spend a weekend with Joe's brother, who had a summer job working for the Bangor Sanitation Department. Pete McKennedy was twenty-one (a fantastic age, it seemed to me; I was struggling through the open sewer that is seventeen) and going to the University of Maine, where he was majoring in English.

It looked like it was going to be a great weekend. On Friday night I got drunk for the first time in my life, along with Pete and Joe and one or two of Pete's friends, and I wasn't even very hungover the next day. Pete didn't work Saturdays, so he took us up to the campus and showed us around. It's really very pretty up there in summer, although on a Saturday in July there weren't many pretty coeds to look at. Pete told us that most of the summer students took off for Bar Harbor or Clear Lake on weekends.

We were just getting ready to go back to Pete's place when he saw a guy he knew slouching down toward the steam-plant parking lot.

"Scragg!" He yelled. "Hey, Scragg!"

Scragg was a big guy wearing paint-splattered, faded jeans and a blue workshirt. He had a drooping sand-colored mustache and was smoking an evil-looking little black cigar that he later identified as the Original Smoky Perote. It smelled like slowly burning underwear.

"How's it hanging?" He asked.

"Up a foot," Pete said. "This is my brother, Joe, and his buddy Charlie Decker," he introduced. "Scragg Simpson."

“Howdy-doody,” Scragg said, shaking hands and dismissing us. “What you doing tonight, Peter?”

“Thought the three of us might go to a movie.”

“Doan do that, Pete,” Scragg said with a grin. “Doan do that, baby.”

“What’s better?” Pete asked, also grinning.

“Dana Collette’s throwing a party at this camp her folks own out near Schoodic Point. There’s gonna be about forty million unattached ladies there. Bring dope.”

“Does Larry Moeller have any grass?” Pete asked.

“Last I knew, he had a shitload. Foreign, domestic, local…everything but filter tips.”

Pete nodded. “We’ll be there, unless the creek rises.”

Scragg nodded and waved a hand as he prepared to resume his version of that ever-popular form of campus locomotion, the Undergraduate Slouch. “Meetcha,” he said to Joe and me.

We went down to see Jerry Mueller, who Pete said was the biggest dope dealer in the Orono-Oldtown-Stillwater triangle. I kept my cool about it, as if I were one of the original Placerville Jones men, but privately I was excited and pretty apprehensive. As I remember it, I sort of expected to see Jerry sitting naked on the john with a piece of rubber flex tied off below his elbow and a hypo dangling from the big forearm vein. And watching the rise and fall of ancient Atlantis in his navel.

He had a small apartment in Oldtown, which borders the campus on one side. Oldtown is a small city with three distinctions: its paper mill; its canoe factory; and twelve of the roughest honky-tonks in this great smiling country. It also has an encampment of real reservation Indians, and most of them look at you as if wondering how much hair you might have growing out of your asshole and whether or not it would be worth scalping.

Jerry turned out to be not an ominous Jones-man type holding court amid the reek of incense and Ravi Shankar music, but a small guy with a constant wedge-of-lemon grin. He was fully clothed and in his right mind. His only ornament was a bright yellow button which bore the message GOLDILOCKS LOVED IT. Instead of Ravi and His Incredible Boinging Sitar, he had a large collection of bluegrass music. When I saw his Greenbriar Boys albums, I asked him if he’d ever heard the Tarr Brothers—I’ve always been a country-and-bluegrass nut. After that, we were off. Pete and Joe just sat

around looking bored until Jerry produced what looked like a small cigarette wrapped in brown paper.

"You want to light it?" he asked Pete.

Pete lit it. The smell was pungent, almost tart, and very pleasant. He drew it deep, held the smoke, and passed the j on to Joe, who coughed most of it out.

Jerry turned back to me. "You ever heard the Clinch Mountain Boys?"

I shook my head. "Heard of them, though."

"You gotta listen to this," he said. "Boy, is it horny." He put an LP with a weird label on the stereo. The j came around to me. "You smoke cigarettes?" Jerry asked me paternally.

I shook my head.

"Then draw slow, or you'll lose it."

I drew slow. The smoke was sweet, rather heavy, acrid, dry. I held my breath and passed the j on to Jerry. The Clinch Mountain Boys started in on "Blue Ridge Breakdown."

Half an hour later we had progressed through two more joints and were listening to Flatt and Scruggs charge through a little number called "Russian Around." I was about ready to ask when I should start feeling stoned when I realized I could actually visualize the banjo chords in my mind. They were bright, like long, steel threads, and shuttling back and forth like looms. They were moving rapidly, but I could follow them if I concentrated deeply. I tried to tell Joe about it, but he only looked at me in a puzzled, fuzzy way. We both laughed. Pete was looking at a picture of Niagara Falls on the wall very closely.

We ended up sticking around until almost five o'clock, and when we left, I was wrecked out of my mind. Pete bought an ounce of grass from Jerry, and we took off for Schoodic. Jerry stood in the doorway of his apartment and waved good-bye and yelled for me to come back and bring some of my records.

That's the last really happy time I can remember.

It was a long drive down to the coast. All three of us were still very high, and although Pete had no trouble driving, none of us could seem to talk without getting the giggles. I remember asking Pete once what this Dana Collette who was throwing the party looked like, and he just leered. That

made me laugh until I thought my stomach was going to explode. I could still hear bluegrass playing in my head.

Pete had been to a party out there in the spring, and we only took one wrong turn finding it. It was at the end of a narrow mile of gravel marked PRIVATE ROAD. You could hear the heavy bass signature of the music a quarter-mile from the cabin. There were so many cars stacked up that we had to walk from just about that point.

Pete parked and we got out. I was starting to feel unsure of myself and self-conscious again (partly the residue of the pot and partly just me), worried about how young and stupid I would probably look to all these college people. Jerry Mueller had to be one in a hundred. I decided I would just stick close to Joe and keep my mouth closed.

As it turned out, I could have saved the worry. The place was packed to the rafters with what seemed like a million people, every one of them drunk, stoned, or both. The smell of marijuana hung on the air like a heavy mist, along with wine and hot hods. The place was a babble of conversation, loud rock music, and laughter. There were two lights dangling from the ceiling, one red, one blue. That rounds off the first impression the place gave me—it was like the funhouse at Old Orchard Beach.

Scragg waved at us from across the room.

"*Pete!*" someone squealed, almost in my ear. I jerked and almost swallowed my tongue.

It was a short, almost pretty girl with bleached hair and the shortest dress I have ever seen—it was a bright fluorescent orange that looked almost alive in the weird lighting.

"Hi, Dana!" Pete shouted over the noise. "This is my brother, Joe, and one of his buddies, Charlie Decker."

She said hi to both of us. "Isn't it a great party?" she asked me. When she moved, the hem of her dress swirled around the lace bottoms of her panties.

I said it was a great party.

"Did you bring any goodies, Pete?" Pete grinned and held up his Baggie of weed. Her eyes sparkled. She was standing next to me, her hip pressed casually against mine. I could feel her bare thigh. I began to get as horny as a bull moose.

"Bring it over here," she said.

We found a relatively unoccupied corner behind one of the stereo speakers, and Dana produced a huge scrolled water pipe from a low bookshelf that was fairly groaning with Hesse, Tolkien, and Reader's Digest condensed books. The latter belonged to the parents, I assumed. We toked up. The grass was much smoother in the water pipe, and I could hold the smoke better. I began to get very high indeed. My head was filling up with helium. People came and went. Introductions, which I promptly forgot, were made. The thing that I liked best about the introductions was that, every time a stray wandered by, Dana would bounce up to grab him or her. And when she did, I could look straight up her dress to where the Heavenly Home was sheathed in the gauziest of blue nylon. People changed records. I watched them come and go (some of them undoubtedly talking of Michelangelo, or Ted Kennedy or Kurt Vonnegut). A woman asked me if I had read Susan Brownmiller's *Women Rapists.* I said no. She told me it was very tight. She crossed her fingers in front of her eyes to show me how tight it was and then wandered off. I watched the fluorescent poster on the far wall, which showed a guy in a T-shirt sitting in front of a TV. The guy's eyeballs were slowly dripping down his cheeks, and there was a big cheese-eating grin on his face. The poster said: SHEEEIT! FRIDAY NIGHT AND I'M STONED AGAIN!

I watched Dana cross and uncross her legs. A few filaments of pubic hair, nine shades darker than the bleach job, had strayed out of the lacy leg bands. I don't think I have ever been that horny. I doubt if I will ever be that horny again. I had an organ which felt large enough and long enough to pole-vault on. I began to wonder if the male sex organ can explode.

She turned to mg and suddenly whispered in my ear. My stomach heated up twenty degrees instantly, as if I had been eating chili. A moment before, she had been talking to Pete and to some joker I remembered being non-introduced to. Then she was whispering in my ear, her breath tickling the dark channel. "Go on out the back door," she said. "There." She pointed.

It was hard to comprehend, so I just followed her finger. Yes, there was the door. The door was real and the door was earnest. It had one hell of a knob on it. I chuckled, convinced that I had just thought a particularly witty thought. She laughed lightly in my ear and said, "You've been looking up my dress all night. What does that mean?" And before I could say anything, she kissed my cheek softly and gave me a little shove to get me going.

I looked around for Joe, but I didn't see him anyplace. Sorry, Joe. I got up and heard both my knees pop. My legs were stiff from sitting in the same position so long. I had an urge to un-tuck my shirt and cover up the huge bulge in my jeans. I had an urge to tiptoe across the room. I had an urge to cackle wildly and announce to the general attendance that Charles Everett Decker earnestly believed that he was about to get screwed; that—to drop a bad pun—Charles Everett Decker was about to rip off his maiden piece.

I didn't do any of those things.

I went out the back door.

I was so stoned and so horny that I almost fell twenty feet to the tiny white shingle of beach that was down below. The back of the cabin overlooked a sudden rocky drop to a postage-stamp inlet. A flight of weather-washed steps led down. I walked carefully, holding on to the railing. My feet felt a thousand miles away. The music sounded distant on this side, blending and almost being covered by the rhythmic sound of the waves.

There was a slip of a moon and a ghost of a breeze. The scene was so frozenly beautiful that for a moment I thought I had walked into a black-and-white picture postcard. The cabin behind and above was only a dim blur. The trees climbed on both sides, pines and spruces that sloped off to naked rock headland-twin spurs of it, which cupped the crescent-shaped beach where the waves licked. Straight ahead was the Atlantic, pinpointed with uncertain nets of light from the moon. I could see the faintest curve of an island far out to the left, and wondered who walked there that night besides the wind. It was a lonesome thought, and it made me shiver a little.

I slipped off my shoes and waited for her.

I don't know how long it was before she came. I didn't have any wristwatch and was too stoned to be able to judge in any case. And after a little while, unease began to creep in. Something about the shadow of trees on the wet, packed sand, and the sound of the wind. Maybe the ocean itself, a big thing, a mean mother-humper full of unseen life and all those little pricks of light. Maybe the cold feel of the sand under my bare feet. Maybe none of those things, maybe all of them and more. But by the time she put her hand on my shoulder, I had lost my erection. Wyatt Earp striding into the OK Corral with no sixgun.

She turned me around, stood on tiptoe, kissed me. I could feel the warmth of her thighs, but now it was nothing special to me. “I saw you looking at me,” is what she said. “Are you nice? Can you be nice?”

“I can try,” I told her, feeling a little absurd. I touched her breasts, and she held me close. But my erection was still gone.

“Don’t tell Pete,” she said, taking me by the hand. “He’d kill me. We’ve got a…kind of a thing.”

She led me underneath the back steps, where the grass was cool and matted with aromatic pine needles. The shadows made cold venetian blinds on her body as she slipped out of her dress.

“This is so crazy,” she said, and she sounded excited.

Then we were rolling together and my shirt was off. She was working at the snap on the front of my jeans. But my cock was still on coffee break. She touched me, sliding her hand inside my underpants, and the muscles down there jerked—not in pleasure or in revulsion, but in a kind of terror. Her hand felt like rubber, cold and impersonal and antiseptic.

“Come on,” she whispered. “Come on, come on, come on…”

I tried to think of something sexy, anything sexy. Looking up Darleen Andreissen’s skirt in study hall and her knowing it and letting me. Maynard Quinn’s pack of dirty French playing cards. I thought of Sandy Cross in sexy black underwear, and that started to move something around down there…and then, of all things to come cruising out of my imagination, I saw my father with his hunting knife, talking about the Cherokee Nose Job.

[“The what?” Corky Herald asked. I explained the Cherokee Nose Job. “Oh,” Corky said. I went on.]

That did it. Everything collapsed into noodledom again. And after that, there was nothing. And nothing. And nothing. My jeans had joined my shirt. My underpants were somewhere down around my ankles. She was quivering underneath me, I could feel her, like the plucked string of a musical instrument. I reached down and took hold of my penis and shook it as if to ask what was wrong with it. But Mr. Penis wasn’t talking. I let my hand wander around to the warm junction of her thighs. I could feel her pubic hair, a little kinky, shockingly like my own. I slid an exploratory finger into her, thinking: *This is the place. This is the place men like my father joke about on hunting trips and in barber shops. Men kill for this. Force it open. Steal it or bludgeon it. Take it…or leave it.*

“Where is it?” Dana whispered in a high, breathless voice. “Where is it? Where…?”

So I tried. But it was like that old joke about the guy that tried to jam a marshmallow into the piggy bank. Nothing. And all the time I could hear the soft sound of the ocean grounding on the beach, like the soundtrack of a sappy movie.

Then I rolled off. “I’m sorry.” My voice was shockingly loud, rasping.

I could hear her sigh. It was a short sound, an irritated sound. “All right,” she said. “It happens.”

“Not to me,” I said, as if this was the first time in several thousand sexual encounters that my equipment had malfunctioned. Dimly I could hear Mick Jagger and the Stones shouting out “Hot Stuff.” One of life’s little ironies. I still felt wrecked, but it was a cold feeling, depthless. The cold certainty that I was queer crept over me like rising water. I had read someplace that you didn’t have to have any overt homosexual experience to be queer; you could just be that way and never know it until the queen in your closet leaped out at you like Norman Bates’s mom in *Psycho,* a grotesque mugger prancing and mincing in Mommy’s makeup and Mommy’s shoes.

“It’s just as well,” she said. “Pete—”

“Look, I’m sorry.”

She smiled, but it looked manufactured. I’ve wondered since if it was or not. I’d like to believe it was a real smile. “It’s the dope. I bet you’re a hell of a lover when things are right.”

“Fuck,” I said, and shivered at the dead sound in my own voice.

“No.” She sat up. “I’m going back in. Wait until I’m gone awhile before you come up.”

I wanted to tell her to wait, to let me try it again, but I knew I couldn’t, not if all the seas dried up and the moon turned to zinc oxide. She zipped into her dress and was gone, leaving me there under the steps. The moon watched me closely, perhaps to see if I might cry. I didn’t. After a little while I got my clothes straightened around and most of last fall’s leaves brushed off me. Then I went back upstairs. Pete and Dana were gone. Joe was over in a corner, making out with a really stunning girl who had her hands in his mop of blond hair. I sat down and waited for the party to be over. Eventually it was.

By the time the three of us got back to Bangor, dawn had already pulled most of her tricks out of her bag and a red edge of sun was peering down at us from between the smokestacks of beautiful downtown Brewer. None of us had much to say. I felt tired and grainy and not able to tell how much damage had been done to me. I had a leaden feeling that it was more than I really needed.

We went upstairs, and I fell into the tiny daybed in the living room. The last thing I saw before I went to sleep was bars of sunlight falling through the venetian blinds and onto the small throw rug by the radiator.

I dreamed about the Creaking Thing. It was almost the same as when I was small, I in my bed, the moving shadows of the tree outside on the ceiling, the steady, sinister sound. Only, this time the sound kept getting closer and closer, until the door of the bedroom burst open with an awful crack like the sound of doom.

It was my father. My mother was in his arms. Her nose had been slit wide open, and blood streamed down her cheeks like war paint.

"You want her?" he said. "Here, take her, you worthless good-for-nothing. Take her."

He threw her on the bed beside me and I saw that she was dead, and that's when I woke up screaming. With an erection.

Chapter 27

Nobody had anything to say after that one, not even Susan Brooks. I felt tired. There didn't seem to be a great deal left to say. Most of them were looking outside again, but there wasn't anything to see that hadn't been there an hour before—actually less, because all of the pedestrians had been shooed away. I decided Sandra's sex story had been better. There had been an orgasm in hers.

Ted Jones was staring at me with his usual burning intensity (I thought, however, that revulsion had given way entirely to hate, and that was mildly satisfying). Sandra Cross was off in her own world. Pat Fitzgerald was carefully folding a cheap piece of study-hall math paper into an aerodynamically unsound aircraft.

Suddenly Irma Bates said defiantly, "I have to go to the *bathroom!*"

I sighed. It sounded a great deal like the way I remember Dana Collette's sigh at Schoodic Point. "Go, then."

She looked at me unbelievingly. Ted blinked. Don Lordi snickered.

"You'd shoot me."

I looked at her. "Do you need to go to the crapper or not?"

"I can hold it," she said sulkily.

I blew out my cheeks, the way my father does when he's put out. "Well, either go or stop wiggling around in your seat. We don't need a puddle underneath your desk."

Corky went haw-haw at that. Sarah Pasterne looked shocked.

As if to spite me, Irma got up and walked with flat-footed vigor toward the door. I had gained at least one point: Ted was staring at her instead of

me. Once there, she paused uncertainly, hand over the knob. She looked like someone who has just gotten an electric shock while adjusting the TV rabbit ears and is wondering whether or not to try again.

"You won't shoot me?"

"Are you going to the bathroom or not?" I asked. I wasn't sure if I was going to shoot her. I was still disturbed by (jealous of?) the fact that Sandra's story seemed to have so much more power than my own. In some undefined way, they had gained the upper hand. I had the crazy feeling that instead of my holding them, it was the other way around. Except for Ted, of course. We were all holding Ted.

Maybe I was going to shoot her. I certainly didn't have anything to lose. Maybe it would even help. Maybe I could get rid of the crazy feeling that I had waked up in the middle of a new dream.

She opened the door and went out. I never raised the gun off the blotter. The door closed. We could hear her feet moving off down the hall, not picking up tempo, not breaking into a run. They were all watching the door, as if something completely unbelievable had poked its head through, winked, and then withdrawn.

For myself, I had a strange feeling of relief, a feeling so tenuous that I could never explain it.

The footfalls died out.

Silence. I waited for someone else to ask to go to the bathroom. I waited to see Irma Bates dash crazily out of the front doors and right onto the front pages of a hundred newspapers. It didn't happen.

Pat Fitzgerald rattled the wings of his plane. It was a loud sound.

"Throw that goddamn thing away," Billy Sawyer said irritably. "You can't make a paper plane out of study-hall paper." Pat made no move to throw the goddamn thing away. Billy didn't say anything else.

New footfalls, coming toward us.

I lifted up the pistol and pointed it toward the door. Ted was grinning at me, but I don't think he knew it. I looked at his face, at the flat, conventionally good looking planes of his cheeks, at the forehead, barricading all those memories of summer country-club days, dances, cars, Sandy's breasts, calmness, ideals of rightness; and suddenly I knew what the last order of business was; perhaps it had been the only order of business all along; and more importantly, I knew that his eye was the eye of

a hawk and his hand was stone. He could have been my own father, but that didn't matter. He and Ted were both remote and Olympian: gods. But my arms were too tired to pull down temples. I was never cut out to be Samson.

His eyes were so clear and so straight, so frighteningly purposeful—they were politician's eyes.

Five minutes before, the sound of the footfalls wouldn't have been bad, do you see? Five minutes before, I could have welcomed them, put the gun down on the desk blotter and gone to meet them, perhaps with a fearful backward glance at the people I was leaving behind me. But now it was the steps themselves that frightened me. I was afraid Philbrick had decided to take me up on my offer—that he had come to shut off the main line and leave our business unfinished.

Ted Jones grinned hungrily.

The rest of us waited, watching the door. Pat's fingers had frozen on his paper plane. Dick Keene's mouth hung open, and in that moment I could see for the first time the family resemblance between him and his brother Flapper, a borderline IQ case who had graduated after six long years in Placerville. Flapper was now doing postgraduate work at Thomaston State Prison, doing doctoral work in laundry maintenance and advanced spoon sharpening.

An unformed shadow rose up on the glass, the way it does when the surface is pebbly and opaque. I lifted the pistol to high port and got ready. I could see the class out of the corner of my right eye, watching with absorbed fascination, the way you watch the last reel of a James Bond movie, when the body count really soars.

A clenched sound, sort of a whimper, came out of my throat.

The door opened, and Irma Bates came back in. She looked around peevishly, not happy to find everyone staring at her. George Yannick began to giggle and said, "Guess who's coming to dinner." It didn't make anyone else laugh; it was George's own private yuck. The rest of us just went on staring at Irma.

"What are you looking at me for?" she asked crossly, holding the knob. "People do go to the bathroom, didn't you know that?" She shut the door, went to her seat, and sat down primly.

It was almost noon.

Chapter 28

Frank Philbrick was right on time. *Chink,* and he was on the horn. He didn't seem to be puffing and blowing as badly, though. Maybe he wanted to placate me. Or maybe he'd thought over my advice on his speaking voice and had decided to take it. Stranger things have happened. God knows.

"Decker?"

"I'm here."

"Listen, that stray shot that came through the window wasn't intentional. One of the men from Lewiston—"

"Let's not even bother, Frank," I said. "You're embarrassing me and you're embarrassing these people down here, who saw what happened. If you've got any integrity at all, and I'm sure you do, you're probably embarrassing yourself."

Pause. Maybe he was collecting his temper. "Okay. What do you want?"

"Not much. Everybody comes out at one o'clock this afternoon. In exactly"—I checked the wall clock—"fifty-seven minutes by the clock down here. Without a scratch. I guarantee it."

"Why not now?"

I looked at them. The air felt heavy and nearly solemn, as if between us we had written a contract in someone's blood.

I said carefully, "We have a final piece of business down here. We have to finish getting it on."

"What is it?"

"It doesn't concern you. But we all know what it is." There wasn't a pair of eyes that showed uncertainty. They knew, all right, and that was good,

because it would save time and effort. I felt very tired.

"Now, listen carefully, Philbrick, so we have no misunderstanding, while I describe the last act of this little comedy. In about three minutes, someone is going to pull down all the shades in here."

"No way they are, Decker." He sounded very tough.

I let the air whistle through my teeth. What an amazing man he was. No wonder he screwed up all his drive-safely spiels. "When are you going to get it through your head that I'm in charge?" I asked him. "Someone is going to pull the shades, Philbrick, and it won't be me. So if you shoot someone, you can pin your badge to your ass and kiss them both good-bye."

Nothing.

"Silence gives consent," I said, trying to sound merry. I didn't feel merry. "I'm not going to be able to see what you're doing either, but don't get any clever ideas. If you do, some of these people are going to get hurt. If you sit until one, everything will be fine again and you'll be the big brave policeman everybody knows you are. Now, how 'bout it?"

He paused for a long time. "I'm damned if you *sound* crazy," he said finally.

"How about it?"

"How do I know you're not going to change your mind, Decker? What if you want to try for two o'clock? Or three?"

"How about it?" I asked inexorably.

Another pause. "All right. But if you hurt any of those kids…"

"You'll take away my Junior Achiever card. I know. Go away, Frank."

I could feel him wanting to say something warm, wonderful, and witty, something that would summarize his position for the ages, something like: Fuck off, Decker, or: Cram it up y'ass, Decker; but he didn't quite dare. There were, after all, young girls down here. "One o'clock," he repeated. The intercom went dead. A moment later he was walking across the grass.

"What nasty little masturbation fantasies have you got lined up now, Charlie?" Ted asked, still grinning.

"Why don't you just cool it, Ted?" Harmon Jackson asked remotely.

"Who will volunteer to close the shades?" I asked. Several hands went up. I pointed to Melvin Thomas and said, "Do it slowly. They're probably nervous."

Melvin did it slowly. With the canvas shades pulled all the way down to the sills, the room took on a half-dreamlike drabness. Lackluster shadows clustered in the comers like bats that hadn't been getting enough to eat. I didn't like it. The shadows made me feel very jumpy indeed.

I pointed to Tanis Gannon, who sat in the row of seats closest to the door. "Will you favor us with the lights?"

She smiled shyly, like a deb, and went to the light switches. A moment later we had cold fluorescents, which were not much better than the shadows. I wished for the sun and the sight of blue sky, but said nothing. There was nothing to say. Tanis went back to her seat and smoothed her skirt carefully behind her thighs as she sat down.

"To use Ted's adequate phrase," I said, "there is only one masturbation fantasy left before we get down to business—or two halves of one whole, if you want to look at it that way. That is the story of Mr. Carlson, our late teacher of chemistry and physics, the story that good old Tom Denver managed to keep out of the papers but which, as the saying goes, remains in our hearts.

"And how my father and I got it on following my suspension."

I looked at them, feeling a dull, horrid ache in the back of my skull. Somewhere it had all slipped out of my hands. I was reminded of Mickey Mouse as the sorcerer's apprentice in the old Disney cartoon *Fantasia. I* had brought all the brooms to life, but now where was the kindly old magician to say abracadabra backwards and make them go back to sleep?

Stupid, stupid.

Pictures whirled in front of my eyes, hundreds of them, fragments from dreams, fragments from reality. It was impossible to separate one from the other. Lunacy is when you can't see the seams where they stitched the world together anymore. I supposed there was still a chance that I might wake up in my bed, safe and still at least half-sane, the black, irrevocable step not taken (or at least not yet), with all the characters of this particular nightmare retreating back into their subconscious caves. But I wasn't banking on it.

Pat Fitzgerald's brown hands worked on his paper plane like the sad, moving fingers of death itself.

I said:

Chapter 29

There was no one reason why I started carrying the pipe wrench to school.

Now, even after all of this, I can't isolate the major cause. My stomach was hurting all the time, and I used to imagine people were trying to pick fights with me even when they weren't. I was afraid I might collapse during physical-education calisthenics, and wake up to see everybody around me in a ring, laughing and pointing…or maybe having a circle jerk. I wasn't sleeping very well. I'd been having some goddamn funny dreams, and it scared me, because quite a few of them were wet dreams, and they weren't the kind that you're supposed to wake up after with a wet sheet. There was one where I was walking through the basement of an old castle that looked like something out of an old Universal Pictures movie. There was a coffin with the top up, and when I looked inside I saw my father with his hands crossed on his chest. He was neatly decked out—pun intended, I guess—in his dress Navy uniform, and there was a stake driven into his crotch. He opened his eyes and smiled at me. His teeth were fangs. In another one my mother was giving me an enema and I was begging her to hurry because Joe was outside waiting for me. Only, Joe was there, looking over her shoulder, and he had his hands on her breasts while she worked the little red rubber bulb that was pumping soapsuds into my ass. There were others, featuring a cast of thousands, but I don't want to go into them. It was all Napoleon XIV stuff.

I found the pipe wrench in the garage, in an old toolbox. It wasn't a very big piece, but there was a rust-clotted socket on one end. And it hefted heavy in my hand. It was winter then, and I used to wear a big bulky

sweater to school every day. I have an aunt that sends me two of those every year, birthday and Christmas. She knits them, and they always come down below my hips. So I started to carry the pipe wrench in my back pocket. It went everyplace with me. If anyone ever noticed, they never said. For a little while, it evened things up, but not for long. There were days when I came home feeling like a guitar string that has been tuned five octaves past its proper position. On those days I'd say hi to Mom, then go upstairs and either weep or giggle into my pillow until it felt as if all my guts were going to blow up. That scared me. When you do things like that, you are ready for the loony bin.

The day that I almost killed Mr. Carlson was the third of March. It was raining, and the last of the snow was just trickling away in nasty little rivulets. I guess I don't have to go into what happened, because most of you were there and saw it. I had the pipe wrench in my back pocket. Carlson called me up to do a problem on the board, and I've always hated that—I'm lousy in chemistry. It made me break out in a sweat every time I had to go up to that board.

It was something about weight-stress on an inclined plane, I forget just what, but I fucked it all up. I remember thinking he had his fucking gall, getting me up here in front of everybody to mess around with an inclined-plane deal, which was really a physics problem. He probably had it left over from his last class. And he started to make fun of me. He was asking me if I remembered what two and two made, if I'd ever heard of long division, wonderful invention, he said, ha-ha, a regular Henry Youngman. When I did it wrong for the third time he said, "Well, that's just *woonderful,* Charlie. *Woooonderful*." He sounded just like Dicky Cable. He sounded so much like him that I turned around fast to look. He sounded so much like him that I reached for my back pocket where that pipe wrench was tucked away, before I even thought. My stomach was all drawn up tight, and I thought I was just going to lean down and blow my cookies all over the floor.

I hit the back pocket with my hand, and the pipe wrench fell out. It hit the floor and clanged.

Mr. Carlson looked at it. "Now, just what is that?" he asked, and started to reach for it.

"Don't touch it," I said, and reached down and grabbed it for myself.

"Let me see it, Charlie." He put his hand out for it.

I felt as if I were going in twelve different directions at once. Part of my mind was screaming at me—really, actually screaming, like a child in a dark room where there are horrible, grinning boogeymen.

"Don't," I said. And everybody was *looking* at me. All of them staring.

"You can give it to me or you can give it to Mr. Denver," he said.

And then a funny thing happened to me…except, when I think about it, it wasn't funny at all. There must be a line in all of us, a very clear one, just like the line that divides the light side of a planet from the dark. I think they call that line the terminator. That's a very good word for it. Because at one moment I was freaking out, and at the next I was as cool as a cucumber.

"I'll give it to you, skinner," I said, and thumped the socket end into my palm. "Where do you want it?"

He looked at me with his lips pursed. With those heavy tortoiseshell glasses he wore, he looked like some kind of bug. A very stupid kind. The thought made me smile. I thumped the business end of the wrench into my palm again.

"All right, Charlie," he said. "Give that thing to me and then go up to the office. I'll come up after class."

"Eat shit," I said, and swung the pipe wrench behind me. It thocked against the slate skin of the blackboard, and little chips flew out. There was yellow chalk dust on the socket end, but it didn't seem any worse for the encounter. Mr. Carlson, on the other hand, winced as though it had been his mother I'd hit instead of some fucking torture-machine blackboard. It was quite an insight into his character, I can tell you. So I hit the blackboard again. And again.

"*Charlie!*"

"It's a treat…to beat your meat…on the Mississippi mud," I sang, whacking the blackboard in time. Every time I hit it, Mr. Carlson jumped. Every time Mr. Carlson jumped, I felt a little better. Transitional action analysis, baby. Dig it. The Mad Bomber, that poor sad sack from Waterbury, Connecticut, must have been the most well-adjusted American of the last quarter-century.

"Charlie, I'll see that you're suspen—"

I turned around and began to whack away at the chalk ledge. I had already made a hell of a hole in the board itself; it wasn't such a tough board at that, not once you had its number. Erasers and chalk fell on the

floor, puffing up dust. I was just on the brink of realizing you could have anybody's number if you held a big enough stick when Mr. Carlson grabbed me.

I turned around and hit him. Just once. There was a lot of blood. He fell on the floor, and his tortoiseshell glasses fell off and skated about eight feet. I think that's what broke the spell, the sight of those glasses sliding across the chalk-dusty floor, leaving his face bare and defenseless, looking the way it must look when he was asleep. I dropped the pipe wrench on the floor and walked out without looking back. I went upstairs and told them what I had done.

Jerry Kesserling picked me up in a patrol car and they sent Mr. Carlson to Central Maine General Hospital, where an X ray showed that he had a hairline fracture just above the frontal lobe. I understand they picked four splinters of bone out of his brain. A few dozen more, and they could have put them together with airplane glue so they spelled ASSHOLE and given it to him for his birthday with my compliments.

There were conferences. Conferences with my father, with good old Tom, with Don Grace, and with every possible combination and permutation of the above. I conferenced with everybody but Mr. Fazio, the janitor. Through it all my father kept admirably calm—my mother would come out of the house and was on tranquilizers—but every now and then during these civilized conversations, he would turn an icy, speculative eye on me that I knew eventually we would be having our own conference. He could have killed me cheerfully with his bare hands. In a simpler time, he might have done it.

There was a very touching apology to a bandage-wrapped, black-eyed Mr. Carlson and his stony-eyed wife ("…distraught…haven't been myself…sorrier than I can say…"), but I got no apology for being badgered in front of the chemistry class as I stood sweating at the blackboard with all the numbers looking like fifth-century Punic. No apology from Dicky Cable or Dana Collette. Or from your Friendly Neighborhood Creaking Thing who told me through tight lips on the way home from the hospital that he wanted to see me out in the garage after I had changed my clothes.

I thought about that as I took off my sport jacket and my best slacks and put on jeans and an old chambray workshirt. I thought about not going—just heading off down the road instead. I thought about just going out and

taking it. Something in me rebelled at that. I had been suspended. I had spent five hours in a holding cell in Placerville Center before my father and my hysterical mother ("Why did you do it, Charlie? Why? Why?") forked over the bail money—the charges, at the joint agreement of the school, the cops, and Mr. Carlson (not his wife; she had been hoping I'd get at least ten years), had been dropped later.

One way or the other, I thought my father and I owed each other something. And so I went out to the garage.

It's a musty, oil-smelling place, but completely trim. Shipshape. It's his place, and he keeps it that way. A place for everything, and everything in its place. Yoho-ho, matey. The riding lawnmower placed neatly with its nose against the wall. The gardening and landscaping tools neatly hung up on nails. Jar tops nailed to the roof beams so jars of nails could be screwed into them at eye level. Stacks of old magazines neatly tied up with twine—*Argosy, Bluebook, True, Saturday Evening Post.* The ranch wagon neatly parked facing out.

He was standing there in an old faded pair of twill khakis and a hunting shirt. For the first time, I noticed how old he was starting to look. His belly had always been as flat as a two-by-four, but now it was bulging out a little—too many beers down at Gogan's. There seemed to be more veins in his nose burst out into little purple deltas under the skin, and the lines around his mouth and eyes were deeper.

"What's your mother doing?" he asked me.

"Sleeping," I said. She had been sleeping a lot, with the help of a Librium prescription. Her breath was sour and dry with it. It smelled like dreams gone rancid.

"Good," he said, nodding. "That's how we want it, isn't it?"

He started taking off his belt.

"I'm going to take the hide off you," he said.

"No," I said. "You're not."

He paused, the belt half out of the loops. "What?"

"If you come at me with that thing, I'm going to take it away from you," I said. My voice was trembling and uneven. "I'm going to do it for the time you threw me on the ground when I was little and then lied about it to Mom. I'm going to do it for every time you belted me across the face for doing something wrong, without giving me a second chance. I'm going to

do it for that hunting trip when you said you'd slit her nose open if you ever caught her with another man."

He had gone a deadly pale. Now it was his voice trembling. "You gutless, spineless wonder. Do you think you can blame this on me? You go tell that to that pansy psychiatrist if you want to, that one with the pipe. Don't try it on me."

"You stink," I said. "You fucked up your marriage and you fucked up your only child. You come on and try to take me if you think you can. I'm out of school. Your wife's turning into a pinhead. You're nothing but a booze-hound." I was crying. "You come on and try it, you dumb fuck."

"You better stop it, Charlie," he said. "Before I stop just wanting to punish you and start wanting to kill you."

"Go ahead and try," I said, crying harder. "I've wanted to kill you for thirteen years. I hate your guts. You suck."

So then he came at me like something out of a slave-exploitation movie, one end of his Navy-issue belt wrapped in his fist, the other end, the buckle end, dangling down. He swung it at me, and I ducked. It went by my shoulder and hit the hood of his Country Squire wagon with a hard clank, scoring the finish. His tongue was caught between his teeth, and his eyes were bulging. He looked the way he had that day I broke the storm windows. Suddenly I wondered if that was the way he looked when he made love to my mother (or what passed for it); if that's what she had to look up at while she was pinned under him. The thought froze me with such a bolt of disgusted revelation that I forgot to duck the next one.

The buckle came down alongside my face, ripped into my cheek, pulling it open in a long furrow. It bled a lot. It felt like the side of my face and neck had been doused in warm water.

"Oh, God," he said. "Oh, God, Charlie."

My eye had watered shut on that side, but I could see him coming toward me with the other. I stepped to meet him and grabbed the end of the belt and pulled. He wasn't expecting it. It jerked him off balance, and when he started to run a little to catch it back, I tripped him up and he thumped to the oil-stained concrete floor. Maybe he had forgotten I wasn't four anymore, or nine years old and cowering in a tent, having to take a whiz while he yucked it up with his friends. Maybe he had forgotten or never

knew that little boys grow up remembering every blow and word of scorn, that they grow up and want to eat their fathers alive.

A harsh little grunt escaped him as he hit the concrete. He opened his hands to break his fall, and I had the belt. I doubled it and brought it down on his broad khaki ass. It made a loud smack, and it probably didn't hurt much, but he cried out in surprise, and I smiled. It hurt my cheek to smile. He had really beaten the shit out of my cheek.

He got up warily. "Charlie, put that down," he said. "Let's take you to the doctor and get that stitched up."

"You better say yes-sir to the Marines you see if your own kid can knock you down," I said.

That made him mad, and he lunged at me, and I hit him across the face with the belt. He put his hands up to his face, and I dropped the belt and hit him in the stomach as hard as I could. The air whiffled out of him, and he doubled over. His belly was soft, even softer than it had looked. I didn't know whether to feel disgust or pity suddenly. It occurred to me that the man I really wanted to hurt was safely out of my reach, standing behind a shield of years.

He straightened up, looking pale and sick. There was a red mark across his forehead where I had hit him with the belt.

"Okay," he said, and turned around. He pulled a hardhead rake off the wall. "If that's how you want it."

I reached out beside me and pulled the hatchet off the wall and held it up with one hand.

"That's how I want it," I said. "Take one step, and I'll cut your head off, if I can."

So we stood there, trying to figure out if we meant it. Then he put the take back, and I put the hatchet back. There was no love in it, no love in the way we looked at each other. He didn't say, "*If you'd had the guts to do that five years ago, none of this would have happened, son…come on, I'll take you down to Gogan's and buy you a beer in the back room.*" And I didn't say I was sorry. It happened because I got big enough, that was all. None of it changed anything. Now I wish it was him I'd killed, if I had to kill anyone. This thing on the floor between my feet is a classic case of misplaced aggression.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get that stitched up."

“I can drive myself.”

“I’ll drive you.”

And so he did. We went down to the emergency room in Brunswick, and the doctor put six stitches in my cheek, and I told him that I had tripped over a chunk of stove wood in the garage and cut my cheek on a fireplace screen my dad was blacking. We told Mom the same thing. And that was the end of it. We never discussed it again. He never tried to tell me what to do again. We lived in the same house, but we walked in wide circles around each other, like a pair of old toms. If I had to guess, I’d say he’ll get along without me very well…like the song says.

During the second week of April they sent me back to school with the warning that my case was still under consideration and I would have to go see Mr. Grace every day. They acted like they were doing me a favor. Some favor. It was like being popped back into the cabinet of Dr. Caligari.

It didn’t take as long to go bad this time. The way people looked at me in the halls. The way I knew they were talking about me in the teachers’ rooms. The way nobody would even talk to me anymore except Joe. And I wasn’t very cooperative with Grace.

Yes, folks, things got bad very fast indeed, and they went from bad to worse. But I’ve always been fairly quick on the uptake, and I don’t forget many lessons that I’ve learned well. I certainly learned the lesson about how you could get anyone’s number with a big enough stick. My father picked up the hardhead take, presumably planning to trepan my skull with it, but when I picked up the hatchet, he put it back.

I never saw that pipe wrench again, but what the fuck. I didn’t need that anymore, because that stick wasn’t big enough. I’d known about the pistol in my father’s desk for ten years. Near the end of April I started to carry it to school.

Chapter 30

I looked up at the wall clock. It was 12:30. I drew in all my mental breath and got ready to sprint down the homestretch.

"So ends the short, brutal saga of Charles Everett Decker," I said. "Questions?"

Susan Brooks said very quietly in the dim room, "I'm sorry for you, Charlie." It was like the crack of damnation.

Don Lordi was looking at me in a hungry way that reminded me of Jaws for the second time that day. Sylvia was smoking the last cigarette in her pack. Pat Fitzgerald labored on his plane, crimping the paper wings, the usual funny-sly expression gone from his face, replaced by something that was wooden and carved. Sandra Cross still seemed to be in a pleasant daze. Even Ted Jones seemed to have his mind on other matters, perhaps on a door he had forgotten to latch when he was ten, or a dog he might once have kicked.

"If that's all, then it brings us to the final order of business in our brief but enlightening stay together," I said. "Have you learned anything today? Who knows the final order of business? Let's see."

I watched them. There was nothing. I was afraid it wouldn't come, couldn't come. So tight, so frozen, all of them. When you're five and you hurt, you make a big noise unto the world. At ten you whimper. But by the time you make fifteen you begin to eat the poisoned apples that grow on your own inner tree of pain. It's the Western Way of Enlightenment. You begin to cram your fists into your mouth to stifle the screams. You bleed on the inside. But they had gone so far…

And then Pig Pen looked up from his pencil. He was smiling a small, red-eyed smile, the smile of a ferret. His hand crept up into the air, the fingers still clenched around his cheap writing instrument. Be-bop-a-lula, she's my baby.

So then it was easier for the rest of them. One electrode begins to arc and sputter, and—yoiks!—look, professor, the monster walks tonight.

Susan Brooks put her hand up next. Then there were several together: Sandra raised hers, Grace Stanner raised hers—delicately—and Irma Bates did likewise. Corky. Don. Pat. Sarah Pasterne. Some smiling a little, most of them solemn. Tanis. Nancy Caskin. Dick Keene and Mike Gavin, both renowned in the Placerville Greyhounds' backfield. George and Harmon, who played chess together in study hall. Melvin Thomas. Anne Lasky. At the end all of them were up—all but one.

I called on Carol Granger, because I thought she deserved her moment. You would have thought that she might have had the most trouble making the switch, crossing the terminator, so to speak, but she had done it almost effortlessly, like a girl shedding her clothes in the bushes after dusk had come to the class picnic.

"Carol?" I said. "What's the answer?"

She thought about how to word it. She put a finger up to the small dimple beside her mouth as she thought, and there was a furrow in her milk-white brow.

"We have to help," she said. "We have to help show Ted where he has gone wrong."

That was a very tasteful way to put it, I thought.

"Thank you, Carol," I said.

She blushed.

I looked at Ted, who had come back to the here and now. He was glaring again, but in kind of a confused way.

"I think the best thing," I said, "would be if I became a sort of combination judge and public attorney. Everyone else can be witnesses; and of course, you're the defendant, Ted."

Ted laughed wildly. "You," he said. "Oh, Jesus, Charlie. Who do you think you are? You're crazy as a bat."

"Do you have a statement?" I asked him.

"You're not going to play tricks with me, Charlie. I'm not saying a darn thing. I'll save my speech for when we get out of here." His eyes swept his classmates accusingly and distrustfully. "And I'll have a lot to say."

"You know what happens to squealers, Rocco," I said in a tough Jimmy Cagney voice. I brought the pistol up suddenly, pointed it at his head, and screamed "BANG!"

Ted shrieked in surprise.

Anne Lasky laughed merrily.

"Shut up!" Ted yelled at her.

"Don't you tell me to shut up," she said. "What are you so afraid of?"

"What…?" His jaw dropped. The eyes bulged. In that moment I felt a great deal of pity for him. The Bible says the snake tempted Eve with the apple. What would have happened if he had been forced to eat it himself?

Ted half-rose from his seat, trembling. "What am I…? What am I…?" He pointed a shivering finger at Anne, who did not cringe at all. "YOU GODDAMN SILLY BITCH! HE HAS GOT A GUN! HE IS CRAZY! HE HAS SHOT TWO PEOPLE! DEAD! HE IS HOLDING US HERE!"

"Not me, he isn't," Irma said. "I could have walked right out."

"We've learned some very good things about ourselves, Ted," Susan said coldly. "I don't think you're being very helpful, closing yourself in and trying to be superior. Don't you realize that this could be the most meaningful experience of our lives?"

"He's a killer," Ted said tightly. "He killed two people. This isn't TV. Those people aren't going to get up and go off to their dressing rooms to wait for the next take. They're *really dead.* He *killed* them."

"Soul killer!" Pig Pen hissed suddenly.

"Where the fuck do you think you get off?" Dick Keene asked. "All this just shakes the shit out of your tight little life, doesn't it? You didn't think anybody'd find out about you banging Sandy, did you? Or your mother. Ever think about her? You think you're some kind of white knight. I'll tell you what you are. You're a cocksucker."

"Witness! Witness!" Grace cried merrily, waving her hand. "Ted Jones buys girlie magazines. I've seen him in Ronnie's Variety doing it."

"Beat off much, Ted?" Harmon asked. He was smiling viciously.

"And you were a Star Scout," Pat said dolorously.

Ted twitched from them like a bear that has been tied to a post for the villagers' amusement. "*I don't masturbate!*" he yelled.

"Right," Corky said disgustedly.

"I bet you really stink in bed," Sylvia said. She looked at Sandra. "Did he stink in bed?"

"We didn't do it in bed," Sandra said. "We were in a car. And it was over so quick…"

"Yeah, that's what I figured."

"All right," Ted said. His face was sweaty. He stood up. "I'm walking out of here. You're all crazy. I'll tell them…" He stopped and added with a strange and touching irrelevancy, "I never meant what I said about my mother." He swallowed. "You can shoot me, Charlie, but you can't stop me. I'm going out."

I put the gun down on the blotter. "I have no intention of shooting you, Ted. But let me remind you that you haven't really done your duty."

"That's right," Dick said, and after Ted had taken two steps toward the door, Dick came out of his seat, took two running steps of his own, and collared him. Ted's face dissolved into utter amazement.

"Hey, Dick," he said.

"Don't you Dick me, you son of a bitch."

Ted tried to give him an elbow in the belly, and then his arms were pinned behind him, one by Pat and one by George Yannick.

Sandra Cross got slowly out of her seat and walked to him, demurely, like a girl on a country road. Ted's eyes were bulging, half-mad. I could taste what was coming, the way you can taste thunderheads before summer rain…and the hail that comes with it sometimes.

She stopped before him, and an expression of sly, mocking devotion crossed her face and was gone. She put a hand out, touched the collar of his shirt. The muscles of his neck bunched as he jerked away from her. Dick and Pat and George held him like springs. She reached slowly inside the open collar of the khaki shirt and began to pull it open, popping the buttons. There was no sound in the room but the tiny, flat tic-tic as the buttons fell to the floor and rolled. He was wearing no undershirt. His flesh was bare and smooth. She moved as if to kiss it, and he spit in her face.

Pig Pen smiled from over Sandra's shoulder, the grubby court jester with the king's paramour. "I could put your eyes out," he said. "Do you know

that? Pop them out just like olives. *Poink! Poink!*"

"*Let me go!* Charlie, make them let me—"

"He cheats," Sarah Pasterne said loudly. "He always looks at my answer sheet in French. Always."

Sandra stood before him, now looking down, a sweet, murmurous smile barely curving the bow of her lips. The first two fingers of her right hand touched the slick spittle on her cheek lightly.

"Here," Billy Sawyer whispered. "Here's something for you, handsome." He crept up behind Ted on tippy-toe and suddenly pulled his hair.

Ted screamed.

"He cheats on the laps in gym, too," Don said harshly. "You really quit football because you dint have no sauce, dintchoo?"

"Please," Ted said. "Please, Charlie." He had begun to grin oddly, and his eyeballs were shiny with tears. Sylvia had joined the little circle around him. She might have been the one who goosed him, but I couldn't really see.

They were moving around him in a slow kind of dance that was nearly beautiful. Fingers pinched and pulled, questions were asked, accusations made. Irma Bates pushed a ruler down the back of his pants. Somehow his shirt was ripped off and flew to the back of the room in two tatters. Ted was breathing in great, high whoops. Anne Lasky began to rub the bridge of his nose with an eraser. Corky scurried back to his desk like a good mouse, found a bottle of Carter's ink, and dumped it in his hair. Hands flew out like birds and rubbed it in briskly.

Ted began to weep and talk in strange, unconnected phrases.

"Soul brother?" Pat Fitzgerald asked. He was smiling, whacking Ted's bare shoulders lightly with a notebook in cadence. "Be my soul brother? That right? Little Head Start? Little free lunch? That right? Hum? Hum? Brothers? Be soul brothers?"

"Got your Silver Star, hero," Dick said, and raised his knee, placing it expertly in the big muscle of Ted's thigh.

Ted screamed. His eyes bulged and rolled toward me, the eyes of a horse staved on a high fence. "*Please…pleeeese, Charlie…pleeeeeeeeee*—" And then Nancy Caskin stuffed a large wad of notebook paper into his mouth. He tried to spit it out, but Sandra rammed it back in.

"That will teach you to spit," sire said reproachfully.

Harmon knelt and pulled off one of his shoes. He rubbed it in Ted's inky hair and then slammed the sole against Ted's chest. It left a huge, grotesque footprint.

"Admit one!" he crowed.

Tentatively, almost demurely, Carol stepped on Ted's stockinged foot and twisted her heel. Something in his foot snapped. Ted blubbered.

He sounded like he was begging somewhere behind the paper, but you couldn't really tell. Pig Pen darted in spiderlike and suddenly bit his nose.

There was a sudden black pause. I noticed that I had turned the pistol around so that the muzzle was pointed at my head, but of course that would not be at all cricket. I unloaded it and put it carefully in the top drawer, on top of Mrs. Underwood's plan book. I was quite confident that this had not been in today's lesson plan at all.

They were smiling at Ted, who hardly looked human at all anymore. In that brief flick of time, they looked like gods, young, wise, and golden. Ted did not look like a god. Ink ran down his cheeks in blue-black teardrops. The bridge of his nose was bleeding, and one eye glared disjointedly toward no place. Paper protruded through his teeth. He breathed in great white snuffles of air.

I had time to think: *We have got it on. Now we have got it all the way on.*

They fell on him.

Chapter 31

I had Corky pull up the shades before they left. He did it with quick, jerky motions. There were now what seemed like hundreds of cruisers out there, thousands of people. It was three minutes of one.

The sunlight hurt my eyes.

"Good-bye," I said.

"Good-bye," Sandra said.

They all said good-bye, I think, before they went out. Their footfalls made a tunny, echoy noise going down the hall. I closed my eyes and imagined a giant centipede wearing Georgia Giants on each of its one hundred feet. When I opened them again, they were walking across the bright green of the lawn. I wished they had used the sidewalk; even after all that had happened, it was still a hell of a lawn.

The last thing I remember seeing of them was that their hands were streaked with black ink.

People enveloped them.

One of the reporters, throwing caution to the winds, eluded three policemen and raced down to where they were, pell-mell.

The last one to be swallowed up was Carol Granger. I thought she looked back, but I couldn't tell for sure. Philbrick started to walk stolidly toward the school. Flashbulbs were popping all over the place.

Time was short. I went over to where Ted was leaning against the green cinderblock wall. He was sitting with his legs splayed out below the bulletin board, which was full of notices from the Mathematical Society of America, which nobody ever read, Peanuts comic strips (the acme of humor, in the

late Mrs. Underwood's estimation), and a poster showing Bertrand Russell and a quote: "Gravity alone proves the existence of God." But any undergraduate in creation could have told Bertrand that it has been conclusively proved that there is no gravity; the earth just sucks.

I squatted beside Ted. I pulled the crumpled wad of math paper out of his mouth and laid it aside. Ted began to drool.

"Ted."

He looked past me, over my shoulder.

"Ted," I said, and patted his cheek gently.

He shrank away. His eyes rolled wildly.

"You're going to get better," I said. "You're going to forget this day ever happened."

Ted made mewling sounds.

"Or maybe you won't. Maybe you'll go on from here, Ted. Build from this. Is that such an impossible idea?"

It was, for both of us. And being so close to Ted had begun to make me very nervous.

The intercom chinked open. It was Philbrick. He was puffing and blowing again.

"Decker?"

"Right here."

"Come out with your hands up."

I sighed. "You come down and get me, Philbrick, old sport. I'm pretty goddamn tired. This psycho business is a hell of a drain on the glands."

"All right," he said, tough. "They'll be shooting in the gas canisters in just about one minute."

"Better not," I said. I looked at Ted. Ted didn't look back; he just kept on looking into emptiness. Whatever he saw there must have been mighty tasty, because he was still drooling down his chin. "You forgot to count noses. There's still one of them down here. He's hurt." That was something of an understatement.

His voice was instantly wary. "Who?"

"Ted Jones."

"How is he hurt?"

"Stubbed his toe."

"He's not there. You're lying."

“I wouldn’t lie to you, Philbrick, and jeopardize our beautiful relationship.”

No answer. Puff, snort, blow.

“Come on down,” I invited. “The gun is unloaded. It’s in a desk drawer. We can play a couple of cribbage hands, then you can take me out and tell all the papers how you did it single-handed. You might even make the cover of *Time if* we work it right.”

Chink. He was off the com.

I closed my eyes and put my face in my hands. All I saw was gray. Nothing but gray. Not even a flash of white light. For no reason at all, I thought of New Year’s Eve, when all those people crowd into Times Square and scream like jackals as the lighted ball slides down the pole, ready to shed its thin party glare on three hundred and sixty-five new days in this best of all possible worlds. I have always wondered what it would be like to be caught in one of those crowds, screaming and not able to hear your own voice, your individuality momentarily wiped out and replaced with the blind empathic overslop of the crowd’s lurching, angry anticipation, hip to hip and shoulder to shoulder with no one in particular.

I began to cry.

When Philbrick stepped through the door, he glanced down at the drooling Tedthing and then up at me. “What in the name of God did you…?” he began.

I made as if to grab something behind Mrs. Underwood’s desktop row of books and plants. “Here it comes, you shit cop!” I screamed.

He shot me three times.

Chapter 32

THOSE WHO WOULD BE INFORMED IN THIS MATTER DRAW YE NEAR AND KNOW YE THEN BY THESE PRESENTS:

CHARLES EVERETT DECKER, convicted in Superior Court this day, August 27, 1976, of the willful murder of *Jean Alice Underwood*, and also convicted this day, August 27, 1976, of the willful murder of *John Downes Vance*, both human beings.

It has been determined by five state psychiatrists that Charles Everett Decker cannot at this time be held accountable for his actions, by reason of insanity. It is therefore the decision of this court that he be remanded to the Augusta State Hospital, where he will be held in treatment until such time as he can be certified responsible to answer for his acts.

To this writ have I set my hand.

(Signed)

(Judge) Samuel K. N. Deleavney

In other words, until shit sticks on the moon, baby.

Chapter 33

i n t e r o f f i c e m e m o

FROM: Dr. Andersen
TO: Rich Gossage, Admin. Wing
SUBJECT: Theodore Jones

Rich,

Am still loath to try the shock treatments on this boy, altho I can't explain it even to myself —call it hunch. Of course I can't justify hunch to the board of directors, or to Jones's uncle, who is footing the bill, which, in a private institution like Woodlands, don't come cheap, as we both know. If there is no movement in the next four to six weeks, we'll go on with the standard electroshock therapy, but for now I would like to run the standard drug schedule again, plus a few not so standard—I am thinking of both synthetic mescaline and psyilocybin, if you concur. Will Greenberger has had a great deal of success with semi-catatonic patients as you know, and these two hallucinogens have played a major part in his therapy.

Jones is such a strange case—goddammit, if we only could be sure what had gone on in that classroom after that Decker individual had the shades pulled down!

Diagnosis hasn't changed. Flat-line catatonic state w /some signs of deterioration.

I might as well admit to you up front, Rich, that I am not as hopeful for this boy as I once was.

November 3, 1976

Chapter 34

December 5, 1976

Dear Charlie,

They tell me you can have mail now, so I thought I would drop you a line. Maybe you noticed this is postmarked Boston—your old buddy finally made the Big Time, and I'm taking sixteen hours here at B.U. (that stands for Bullshit Unlimited). It's all pretty slushy except for my English class. The instructor assigned us a book called *The Postman Always Rings Twice* that was really good, and I got an A on the exam. It's by James Cain, did you ever read it? I'm thinking about majoring in English, how's that for a laugh? Must be your influence. And you were always the brains of the combination.

I saw your mom just before I left Placerville, and she said you were just about all healed up and the last of the drains were out three weeks ago. I was sure glad to hear it. She said you aren't talking much. That doesn't sound like you, skinner. It would sure be a loss to the world if you clammed up and just scrunched in a comer all day.

Although I haven't been home since the semester started, Sandy Cross wrote me a letter with a lot of news about all the people at home. (Will the bastards censor this part? I bet they read all your mail.) Sandy herself decided not to go to college this year. She's just sort of hanging around, waiting for something to happen, I guess. I might as well tell you that I dated her a couple of times last summer, but she just seemed kind of distant. She asked me to say "hi" to you, so "hi" from Sandy.

Maybe you know what happened to Pig Pen, no one in town can believe it, about him and Dick Keene [following has been censored as possibly upsetting to patient], so you can never tell what people are going to do, can you?

Carol Granger's validictory (sp?) speech was reprinted by *Seventeen* magazine. As I remember, it was on "Self-Integrity and a Normal Response to It," or some such happy horseshit. We would have had some fun ranking that one out, right, Charlie?

Oh, yeah, and Irma Bates is going out with some "hippie" from Lewiston. I guess they were even in a demonstration when Robt. Dole came to Portland to campaign in the presidential election stuff. They were arrested and then let go when Dole flew out. Mrs. Bates must be having birds about it. Can't you just see Irma trying to brain Robt. Dole with a Gus Hall campaign sign? Ha-ha, that just kills me. We would have had some laughs over that one, too, Charlie. God, I miss your old cracked ass sometimes.

Gracie Stanner, that cute little chick, is going to get married, and that's also a local sensation. It boggles the mind. [Following has been censored as possibly upsetting to patient.] Anyway, you can never tell what sort of monkeyshines people are going to get up to, right?

Well, guess that's all for now. I hope they are treating you right, Ferd, as you've got to be out of there as soon as they'll let you. And if they start letting you have visitors, I want you to know that I will be the first in line.

There are a lot of us pulling for you, Charlie. Pulling hard.

People haven't forgotten. You know what I mean.

You have to believe that.

With love, your friend,
(Joe McK)

Chapter 35

I haven't had any bad dreams for two weeks, almost. I do lots of jigsaw puzzles. They give me custard and I hate it, but I eat it just the same. They think I like it. So I have a secret again. Finally I have a secret again.

My mom sent me the yearbook. I haven't unwrapped it yet, but maybe I will. Maybe next week I will. I think I could look at all the senior pictures and not tremble a bit. Pretty soon. Just as soon as I can make myself believe that there won't be any black streaks on their hands. That their hands will be clean. With no ink. Maybe next week I'll be completely sure of that.

About the custard: it's only a little secret, but having a secret makes me feel better. Like a human being again.

That's the end. I have to turn off the light now. Good night.